

## THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S EUROPEAN CHOICE AND WHY IT MATTERS

**Dragoș RIZESCU**

Graduate from College of Europe

Bruges, Belgium

*dragos.rizescu10@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

This paper is focused on the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union. In a regional climate marked by the crisis in Ukraine, Moldova is an interesting case. It is arguably the most committed country in the Eastern Partnership to a stronger relationship with the EU. It is also the country that registered most progress in adopting EU policies. And, most of all, it seems the most likely country to challenge the “everything but institutions” principle that has shunned away any hope of EU membership for countries in the European Neighbourhood Policy. The paper will try to outline how the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU has evolved, how the two sides perceive each other, what is the current status and what are the perspectives, while also pointing out to the regional and even international significance of this relationship.

### **Keywords**

Association Agreement, Eastern Partnership, European Neighbourhood Policy, Republic of Moldova

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In international affairs, there are very few, if any, crises that begin and are treated right from the start as global issues. Even issues which are clearly transnational, such as global warming, are perceived differently in several parts of the world. Most start off as regional problems (such as conflicts between two or several states) or even as internal problems (such as what happened during the Arab Spring) and afterwards spill-over, affecting an increasingly wider region and ultimately some make it on the global agenda, depending on their intensity. Therefore, any researcher interested in developments on a global scale should have a good understanding on their regional, national or even local origin.

In the past year, undoubtedly one of the regions that took most headlines in the area of international affairs was Eastern Europe. Starting with Ukraine's refusal to sign a long-awaited Association Agreement with the European Union and continuing with massive street protests, a change in power, a region (Crimea) deciding to join another country via referendum, a tragic crash of a commercial airplane and an internal conflict between the government in Kiev and soldiers fighting for the independence of two Eastern regions, everything was presented in international media. The global consequences were evident from the involvement of outside actors such as the EU, NATO, the UN, Russia or USA to the very human side of its effects illustrated by the airplane crash.

With all this happening, on several occasions the name of two other countries was brought up, being considered of having a rather similar situation to Ukraine: the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. All three countries were former members of the Soviet Union and all three countries signed Association Agreements with the EU in 2014.

With Ukraine's situation being already treated in a variety of articles, this paper will focus on the case of the Republic of Moldova, its relationship with the EU (since Ukraine's relationship with the EU seems to be the source of the current crisis) and its relevance in the region in the current international context.

The structure of the paper is the following. The first part will be a brief overview of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, its importance and recent developments. The second part will show how the relationship between the

EU and Moldova has evolved over time. The third part will assess the current status, after the signing of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Agreement, of the relationship between the parties. Finally, the last part will discuss the perspectives of the Republic of Moldova, of its relationship to the EU and why the outcome of this relationship is important for the region and even at a global scale.

## 2. THE EU'S EASTERN BORDER: FROM ENP TO EAP

Admittedly, the European Union's eastern border has repeatedly moved over time. From the founding six countries to the current twenty-eight, borders have continuously changed, but for the purpose of this paper "Eastern neighbourhood" refers to the EU's Eastern borders after the 2004-2007 enlargements. Depending on which author is cited, the term can be considered to comprise different countries, though generally these are the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and Russia. All of them share a historical link, as they used to be part of the Soviet Union. From the EU's perspective, it was only when the 2004 and 2007 waves of enlargement were clearly approaching that it started paying particular attention to countries in the region, as Chris Patten, EU Commissioner for External Affairs in 2004, admitted at the time (Patten 2004, 5).

This change in priorities was marked by the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy, which was launched in 2003. It was conceived as the framework within which the EU would deal with its "new neighbours", once the enlargement in 2004 would take place (though countries in North Africa were also included in the end). According to the Commission president, Romano Prodi, the policy aimed to establish "a 'ring of friends' surrounding the Union and its closest European neighbours, from Morocco to Russia and the Black Sea" (Prodi 2002), to share "everything but institutions" with the EU (which translates into no clear commitment regarding possible membership for those countries) and to offer "a single market, free trade, open investment regime, approximation of legislation, interconnection of networks" (Prodi 2002).

As Stefan Lehne explains, the idea was that "through long-term engagement, the ENP would support the deep structural transformation of the EU's partner

countries, promoting democratic reforms, the rule of law, and a successful market economy, which could be progressively integrated in the EU's own internal market. The hope was that over time, this would result in a partnership with an area founded on the values of the union" (Lehne 2014, 5). In practice, this was done by agreeing on Action Plans with countries in the neighbourhood (Moldova signed its Action Plan in 2005) which listed reforms that were to be adopted, while receiving EU funding. Yearly country reports were afterwards issued by the Commission in order to assess the progress achieved (Gänzle 2009, 168).

The ENP had its critics, with countries complaining that the EU was "asking too much in terms of adjustments and reforms while offering only modest rewards" (Lehne 2014, 7).

In 2008, a specific framework for developing relations with the EU's Eastern neighbours was set-up within the ENP: the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Besides calls from the new member states for an enforced partnership with the "new Eastern neighbours", the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 also played a role in the EaP set-up (Shapovalova and Boonstra 2012, 59). Following an initiative by Poland and Sweden, the EaP was to reinforce the bilateral track of the ENP, especially through the possibility of negotiating Association Agreements with the countries and offering visa liberalisation. It also added a multilateral track, with high-level meetings of Heads of State (summits comprising EU Members and partner countries every two years) as well as thematic platforms (European Commission 2008, 3-4).

Finally, in 2011 the ENP was reviewed, and a new principle was introduced, known as "the more for more principle". This meant that countries would receive extra funding as a reward for their commitment on pursuing reforms set by EU conditionality (Lehne 2014, 5). Moldova was seen as a likely country to benefit from this opportunity, and it did.

Though as it can be seen the ENP did change since its launch in 2003, its basic objectives stayed the same, and can be summed up in four broad goals. The first was fostering economic relations and sector cooperation between the EU and its partners, as economic relations are the basis of the whole EU and of all its external relations. The second was to promote internal stability in neighbouring countries by helping with reforms, which in turn would help make the whole neighbourhood safer and better governed (leading to better relations and less temptation for third country individuals to migrate to the

EU). The third was ensuring border security and managing citizen mobility, which meant that the EU had to secure its borders while also fostering people-to-people contacts. And finally, though less affirmed and certainly not at an official level, geopolitics was involved: the EU was keen to affirm itself as a power in its neighbourhood, which was necessary if it ever was to be taken seriously as a significant global actor (for more on this issue see for example Bretherton and Vogler 2006).

### 3. THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

In 2004, Marius Vahl wrote that “EU-Moldovan relations have been largely neglected since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, both among policy-makers and by academics” (Vahl 2004, 171). This was because for a long time both sides had been undecided on how to treat each other. On one side, the EU was focused on its closer neighbours, and only after the 2007 enlargement did Moldova reach its borders. On the other side, there was continued political uncertainty in Moldova regarding the country’s orientation in international affairs.

As other countries which were part of the USSR, Moldova signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU in 1994, a document focused mostly on trade matters, which entered into force in 1998. Towards the end of this decade, the Moldovan authorities tried to take cooperation with the EU a step further, asking to start negotiations on an Association Agreement, similar to the ones negotiated with Romania or Bulgaria, something that the EU didn’t seem willing to contemplate (Vahl 2004, 175).

In 2001, the Communist party came to power and the international political orientation of the country began to change, focusing on closer ties with Russia. Still, this did not last, with President Vladimir Voronin becoming rapidly disenchanted with the way relations with Russia were evolving and with no visible solution to the Transnistrian conflict in sight once the Kozak memorandum was rejected (which was supposed to give extended rights to the region) (BBC News 2007). This led to a change in the Communist party’s priorities, which at this point started to also support the goal of EU integration. As one author argued, “this ‘overnight’ change of direction turned Moldovan foreign policy 180 degrees from East to West” (Shapovalova and Boonstra

2012, 60). It might be interesting to mention at this point that in 2014 the Communist party seems to have another change of direction of its own, now supporting again closer relations with Russia (as an example it protested against Moldova initialling the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013) (România Liberă 2014).

In 2005, four years after the Communist party came to power, a political agreement was reached with all parties signing a political declaration supporting the country's path towards European integration (Korosteleva 2012, 107).

EU-Moldova cooperation thus gained a new impetus. In 2005, an Action Plan in the framework of the newly created European Neighbourhood Policy was agreed, the Moldovan Delegation to the EU was set up in Brussels while the EU Delegation to Moldova also opened in Chişinău, alongside the appointment of an EU Special Representative for Moldova (Korosteleva 2012, 107). Moreover, the EU also joined in the newly created "Five-plus-two" format of negotiations for solving the Transnistria conflict, while also launching the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) to Moldova and Ukraine.

The next defining moment in EU-Moldova relations was the year 2009. In Moldova, that year marked a change in power. The Communist party was declared winner following legislative elections in April. However, this was immediately followed by street protests, with people calling the elections "fraudulent" and demanding a recount of the votes (Shapovalova and Boonstra 2012, 61). The civil unrest became known as the "Twitter revolution". In the end, new elections were organized in July and the opposition gained majority, creating the Alliance for European Integration (AEI), which had „as its main objective the implementation of all reforms necessary for Moldova to join the EU" (Danii and Mascateanu 2011, 102).

The year 2009 was also important for the EU: at that time the Eastern Partnership was officially launched, and was intended to foster "a more ambitious partnership" (European Commission 2008, 2) between the EU and its East European partners (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan).

This context gave the new ruling coalition in Moldova the framework in which to pursue the desire for rapprochement with the EU: negotiations on an Association Agreement (AA, which included a "Deep and Comprehensive

Free Trade Area”, answering calls made a decade earlier) were launched in 2010 and an Action Plan for visa liberalisation was set up in 2011 (Shapovalova and Boonstra 2012, 64), listing the reforms necessary before abolition of the visa regime.

Negotiations on the AA and on visas progressed rapidly as they were high on the domestic political agenda of the ruling coalition in Moldova. Despite internal political turmoil at the beginning of 2013 which made some observers wary of the country’s ability to deliver on its commitments (Rinnert 2014, 1), negotiations on the AA (including the DCFTA) were concluded in June 2013 (Rinnert 2014, 3), the agreement was initialled at the Vilnius summit in November 2013 and signed in June 2014 (Deutsche Welle 2014). Also, the European Commission officially announced that Moldova fulfilled all the criteria set up in the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan and, following its recommendation, the Council and the European Parliament agreed in April 2014 to allow visa-free travel to the EU for Moldovans (Euractiv.com 2014).

#### **4. STATUS-QUO: SUCCESS OR DISAPPOINTMENT?**

At the moment, Moldova can be seen as a “success story” for the EU and its Eastern Partnership framework. It is a country where the four ENP objectives have been largely fulfilled, and arguably the “top of the class” in terms of comparison with the other countries in the Eastern Partnership.

On economic and sector cooperation with the EU, the value of trade between Moldova and the EU has more than doubled since the launch of the ENP in 2003 (DG Trade 2014, 4), and trade links are set to expand once the DCFTA will be implemented. Also, according to the official impact assessment ordered by the European Commission, the DCFTA is set to bring a 5.4% growth to Moldova’s GDP (Ecorys and CASE 2012, B10). Moreover, sector cooperation has also progressed, with major steps such as the Republic of Moldova becoming a member of the European Energy Community (2010) (Shapovalova and Boonstra 2012, 64), the process towards a “common aviation area” (European Commission 2012) and the opening of the Romania-Moldova natural gas pipeline (Agerpres 2014).

On internal stability and reforms, the European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries (EaP Index) 2013 (an index for countries in the EaP set

up by civil society), Moldova was the best performer in the region by far on deep and sustainable democracy approximation, scoring at 0.75 (1 being maximum) (Kvashuk, Solonenko and Ursu 2013, 63-64). It is also the country which received the most funding under the “more for more” principle due to its progress with reforms (EuropeAid 2014).

Regarding border security and citizen mobility, Moldova was the first country in the ENP to fulfil all the benchmarks set by the EU and to achieve visa liberalisation, completing the process. It has also taken advantage of all mobility opportunities set up by the EU, leading some observers to state that, out of the EaP countries, “Moldova is the best at using the opportunities for mobility to the EU and ranks highest in people-to-people contracts” (Kvashuk, Solonenko and Ursu 2013, 85). Also, on border security, the European Union was active through the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) and generally successful (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2014, 9).

In terms of geopolitics, the EU has played an increasing role in the country (visible through the reforms implemented), with the ruling political coalition being clearly EU-oriented. Moreover, the EU has an increasing influence in dealing with the Transnistria “frozen conflict”, as the break-away region is now faced with the choice between signing the Association Agreement alongside authorities in Chişinău or refusing it, which would lead to the interruption of almost all exports to the EU. Currently, Transnistrian exports to the EU make up about half of all the exports from the region (Popescu and Litra 2014, 8).

All of this appears to make Moldova the “success story” of the Eastern Partnership, although reforms in several areas are still necessary (such as in the area of fight against corruption, justice reform, as well as economic sector reforms and privatisations as per DCFTA commitments). Undoubtedly a part in this successful outcome was played by Romania, whose geographical proximity and especially historical ties made it Moldova’s strongest ally and supporter within the EU. This continues even today, when Romanian officials are openly speaking about Moldova becoming a member of the EU, something rather taboo in other EU member states (Euractiv.com 2014).

However, the current status of the EU-Moldova relationship might not be necessarily seen only as a success from Chişinău. Indeed, some analysts picture the current situation as more of a disappointment (Dungaciu 2013).



This is because, despite the signing of the Association Agreement, Moldova still lacks any form of official perspective of becoming a member of the European Union. The “everything but institutions” principle set up by Romano Prodi for the ENP back in 2002 still holds. As a comparison, countries in the Western Balkans (such as Bosnia and Herzegovina for example) have a clear reference in their Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the EU to their status as “potential candidate states”, something that Moldova (as well as Georgia or Ukraine) lacks.

#### 4. POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

So what next for Moldova? Authorities seem keen to speak about the steps towards becoming EU members, even putting forward the year 2019 as possible year of accession to the EU (New Europe Online 2014), though the first and most important step would be to at least be recognized as a potential candidate. Becoming an official candidate and beginning negotiations would come much later. Even without a formal “potential candidate status” as all Western Balkan countries received back in 2000 (only Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are still at this stage, while other countries have moved on to “candidate status” – like Albania, or even began negotiations – like Serbia, with Croatia being the only Western Balkan country to date having joined the EU), the Republic of Moldova could still submit a formal bid for membership (as it fulfils the essential criteria mentioned in the EU Treaties). According to procedure, this is followed by an assessment from the Commission and a decision by the Council, which grants (or not) the “candidate status” to the country (though one could mention that this status does not imply much progress in itself, as Turkey for example has been recognized as a candidate country since 1999). Still, citing Moldova’s current positive track record on implementing EU reforms and its “success story” status, one could wonder if the EU would be able to officially reject an official bid – though a postponement of the process citing the Transnistria issue is certainly not out of the question.

With this in mind, this paper advances two possible scenarios regarding Moldova’s status in the near future: a strongly “pro-Western” scenario, or a “membership-lite” status.

The first scenario would mean that a strong pro-EU coalition would be formed after the November elections, with the government continuing to actively pursue engagement with the European Union. This would now mean implementing the Association Agreement in its provisional form (until all EU Member States have ratified it, which is needed for it to officially enter into force), strengthening efforts towards obtaining an official recognition of a “membership perspective” (with the first important event being the Riga summit in 2015), and even submitting an official membership application as soon as 2015 (current PM Iurie Leancă even stated this as an objective for 2015) (Euronews 2014). The problem with this scenario is that actively pursuing EU integration might trigger problems from both a geopolitical point of view (Russia already showed in Ukraine or Armenia that is not happy with former Soviet states getting closer to the EU) and from an internal point of view, with only 44% of the population being in favour of joining the EU according to a recent poll (CIVIS 2014).

As well, one could hardly see how the EU might accept the prospect of the Republic of Moldova becoming a member as long as the Transnistria issue is not solved and since EU officials openly speak about not wishing to repeat the Cyprus scenario. And, with an openly pro-EU Moldova, it is hard to see how Russia, with visible high stakes and influences in Transnistria, might work on finding a solution for the conflict, which could in turn lead to an in-or-out decision, with Moldova only being able to join the EU if it decides on an official break-up with Transnistria. Also, besides Transnistria, another possible territorial issue might be Gagauzia, a region which held a local referendum this year calling for integration within the Eurasian Customs Union instead of the European Union (Chiochina and Grosser 2014).

The second scenario, which seems more likely at this stage, is of a “membership-lite” status. Academics specialised on the European Union have repeatedly spoken about the trend of increasing differentiation within the EU (with only some countries joining on several EU projects – Schengen and the Eurozone are the most visible, but more and more situations, such as the enhanced cooperation procedure under the Lisbon Treaty are appearing). This means that, as being a member of the EU becomes more and more vague, this could also help non-members to participate in more and more EU projects and policies. The Association Agreement with Moldova has already been described as going further than any other such agreements signed by the EU in the past,

being comparable in terms of compliance with the EU *acquis* with the European Economic Area, where states that are not EU members have to fully comply with EU legislation (Emerson 2014, 22).

Therefore, as the ENP has indeed been described as “enlargement lite” (Lehne 2014, 4), it is only foreseeable that Moldova might enjoy something that some authors already named “membership-lite” (Raik and Tamminen 2014, 57), which means continuing on deepening cooperation with the EU (such as working on the implementation of the AA and participating in selected policies) but without becoming an official Member state. This is likely, as it would mean that Moldova would continue to enjoy various EU benefits (technical assistance, more funding, market access, free movement), without making a complete on-off choice between East and West and without amplifying tensions in Transnistria or angering Russia (which would likely happen if Moldova was to become an EU candidate state).

There are also two further scenarios that can be imagined, though both seem unlikely at this stage. One would be another “180 degrees turn”, this time from West to East, with the country joining the Eurasian Economic Union, which is currently only a Customs Union comprising Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus (The Economist 2014), instead of the European Union. This is seen as the possible scenario if the Communist Party comes to power following the next elections. But, having in memory the 2009 Twitter revolution, it is unlikely that the majority of the population would agree to such a dramatic turn of allegiance in foreign policy. According to a recent poll, when asked to choose, 29% of Moldovans said they would favour the country joining the EU, 22% favoured the Eurasian Union, while 33% were undecided (the rest refused to state a choice) (Centrul de Analize și Investigații Sociologice Politologice și Psihologice CIVIS 2014).

The other scenario would be “complete neutrality”, a sort of “Swiss model”, with the country not joining any major economic bloc. However, since Moldova is indeed the poorest country in Europe, it is almost impossible to imagine the country could develop without outside help. Joining either the European Union or the Eurasian Union project proposed by Russia would give the country access to more resources, and it is highly doubtful that the country could balance on the long-run between the two blocks.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at taking a look at the current status of the Republic of Moldova as a country situated right between two sides in a very tense relationship at the moment (the EU and Russia), in a situation similar to Ukraine's. It is a country that has an openly pro-EU governing coalition, but with also a powerful Communist (and generally pro-Russian) opposition party. It has recently signed a far-reaching Association Agreement with the EU but its future relationships with the bloc as well as with Russia are uncertain. The scenarios mentioned in the paper tried to give a glimpse to how the situation might develop.

Why is Moldova important seen from a global perspective? As the last year has shown, events in Eastern Europe have a global impact. The situation in Ukraine has ended up involving major actors at a global scale, including Russia and the US, the EU, NATO and the UN. It is seen as a proxy Cold War-style conflict between the West and the East. Moldova is, in some terms, similar. It is a country that (currently) appears to choose "the West", with officials openly speaking about EU integration, but in which Russia holds significant leverage (in terms of Russians living in the country, influence in Transnistria, gas supplies and access to its own market for the Moldovan population). So the way the situation will develop in Moldova is significant not only for the country, but for its neighbours, for the region, and, in the end, for the world.

One should only think about what global consequences EU membership for Moldova would have: it would mean another enlargement for the world's most powerful economic bloc. It would mean that some sort of solution (even break-up) would be found for the frozen conflict in Transnistria. This in turn would have effects on other similar regions (Georgia, Armenia, even Ukraine). It would probably lead to further retaliation from Russia (such as trade embargoes). This might also lead to an US response. In the current tense nature of the relations between the North-Atlantic community and Russia, Moldova is right between the two sides and that is why developments in the country are important for the region and for the world.

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