
Focus Areas to Act upon to Enable the EU Integration Readiness of the Republic of Moldova¹

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Abstract: *As the Chisinau administration³ is currently the most pro-European in the country's history, and considering the great mobilisation towards integration on Brussels's side, it is a very relevant endeavour to analyse Moldova's main opportunities and barriers. The country's main impediments towards Europeanization and the recent solutions found towards these problems are examined here. The essay provides a set of areas to focus on to enhance the Republic of Moldova's European integration, coupled with a review of future potential geopolitical scenarios.*

Keywords: *EU, Moldova, European integration, hybrid threats*

The Focus areas to act upon to enable the EU integration readiness are the following:

1) Equal access to correct information for both Romanian and Russian speakers

Russian disinformation is a considerable challenge. According to the latest polls released in the Republic of Moldova, there's a clear gap between the political opinions of those who answered in Romanian, as opposed to those answering in Russian. Only 20% of Russian-speaking respondents answered positively that Russia poses a security threat to Moldova, as opposed to 52% of the Romanian speakers. Confidence in Putin is at 29% among the Romanians, while the Russian speakers registered a 57% confidence. One of the clearest differences regards the of EU accession: 67% of Romanian speakers support it, as opposed to 21% of the Russian-speaking population which is much more prone to Moscow's manipulated narratives.⁴

While it is very difficult to sway people away from their pro-Russian views, it is important for those Moldovans to receive an alternative viewpoint from a pro-Western perspective that can counterbalance Kremlin's propaganda and help them expand their information bubble. This leads to the following recommendation: to successfully prepare the integration of the Republic of Moldova into Europe, Moldovan and European authorities need to penetrate the Russian-language information sphere. This should be done through campaigns that showcase the results of European investments, the financial and educational opportunities that would be available to Moldovan citizens in the EU, contrasted to the actual financial contributions the Russian Federation has brought to the country in the latter years. In the use of Russian language, it is essential to reach currently isolated audiences and break the Russian information monopoly. The true fight for Europeanization revolves around changing the mentality of ordinary individuals and keeping a significant percentage of the population connected to the course and outcome of reforms.

2) Act with urgency: the reform timeframe of the Maia Sandu administration is limited

Unlike other post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine and Georgia, where there is a large political and especially social consensus regarding the country's future, the Republic of Moldova is prone to

¹ This article is a continuation of a paper previously published in *L'Europe unie* by the same author, entitled "A Window of Opportunity with an Existential Stake: The European integration of the Republic of Moldova",

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³ President Maia Sandu in 2023.

⁴ "WatchDog.MD community presented the results of a sociological survey", Watch Dog.md, February 3, 2022, URL: <https://watchdog.md/en/polls/206024/comunitatea-watchdog-md-a-prezentat-rezultatele-unui-sondaj-de-opinie/>

180-degree changes in foreign policies from one electoral cycle to another. The next presidential elections will be held soon and the parliamentary elections in 2025. Moldovan society is still relatively equally divided between pro-Europeans and pro-Russians. It is important for Moldovan society to be embarked into the practical reforms within the country now, as the pro-Russian political forces can regroup at any moment.

3) Extensive use of European expertise in implementing institutional reform

While financial aid is definitely valuable to the Republic of Moldova, who is facing a clear economic and energy crisis, there is nothing more prized than European expertise. Civilian and official missions should become the norm through which reform can be accelerated in the candidate state, since that involves a direct implication and monitoring process.

Considering Moldova's aforementioned vulnerabilities, the following sectors could benefit the most from the expertise of European civilian/official missions:

- The monitoring of the **financial sector**, so that money laundering schemes, involving both private and state actors, can be prevented.

- The **defence sector**, especially when it comes to aerial surveillance. In the case of destabilizing acts from Russia, such as violent actions or kidnapping attempts against public officials (as revealed in official documents received by Moldova's president from Volodymyr Zelensky in February 2023)⁵, it is necessary for Moldova to have a modern and enhanced special forces unit that can prevent small-scale destabilizing acts.

- Legislation such as **anti-oligarch laws** to ensure that all loopholes are avoided, while also making sure the laws are tailored to the national context.

Potential geopolitical scenarios in relation with the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war

1) Russian advancement:

According to analysts and military sources, the Republic of Moldova's future as an EU member and as a sovereign state will be determined to a large extent by the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In the case of a Russian advancement in the South, in the Odessa region, Moldova would be pinned and would most likely represent Moscow's next target.⁶ From that point, Russia could either increase hybrid attacks on Moldova, from protests, instigation to violence, disinformation, cyber-attacks, bomb threats etc. (either directly or by using Transnistria and Gagauzia as proxies), or it could directly invade the country, whose army would not last for long. In that scenario, not much can be done. If NATO avoided a conflict with Russia after invading Ukraine, it will most likely not get involved in one for the Republic of Moldova. Thus, supporting Ukraine's war effort is significantly impacting the prospects of Moldova's reform process.

2) Stagnation of the front or Ukrainian advancement

If Russian advancement is blocked or if Russia loses the war, the Republic of Moldova's pathway towards the European Union is fully in its own hands. If the current flow of governmental reforms is maintained and progress in important legal cases is registered, Moldova could become an EU member in the late 2020s-early 2030s. Still, the EU will have to monitor this process carefully, as

⁵ "Maia Sandu seconds Zelensky, warning of Kremlin plans to overthrow Moldova government". Meduza, February 13, 2023, URL: <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/02/13/maia-sandu-seconds-zelensky-warning-of-kremlin-plans-to-overthrow-moldova-government>

⁶ Christine Karelska, "Odesa Defends Not Only Itself but All of South Central Europe". Visegrad Insight, July 20, 2022, URL: <https://visegradinsight.eu/odesa-ukraine-russia-war-cee/>

it could lead Moldova towards being either a revitalizer of European values or a factor of instability due to its vulnerability to Russian hybrid aggression.⁷

Moldova as a Trojan horse is a clear possibility, if oligarchic influence persists and if Russia's influence in different Moldovan institutions and especially in the informational sphere persists. Furthermore, Transnistria could be considered a separate *de facto* entity in the case of EU membership (similar to the Northern Cyprus case), which would entail a relative preservation of the *status quo*, but still represent a constant threat. Gagauzia could become an even more insidious element. **There is no pro-European force within the autonomous region Gagauzia** and it could become problematic for the European Union. Thus, it is a justifiable concern of the European Union that Moldova could become a Trojan horse, an EU member state through which Russia could infiltrate in Europe and sabotage it from within. To prevent that, Moldova's separation from Russia must be comprehensive and include the more pro-Russian regions of the country, such as Gagauzia. If maybe the European ideals would not be an argument for the Russophiles or for the undecided population, then the economic incentive might be more fruitful for the integration process.

If the integration process is done correctly and in full, having **Moldova as a revitalizer of European values** is a probable scenario. In the current geopolitical climate in which, through populism, the efficiency and advantages of European democratic values are put under scrutiny in Western Europe, new Eastern European members could revitalize the European ethos. With a young, Western-educated political leadership, a large diaspora already integrated in mainly Southern and Western European countries and an ever-increasing pro-European sentiment (especially among the younger generations), Moldova could be a reminder as to what Europe stands for, and what its benefits are, as opposed to being under Russia's serfdom.

3) The “operation unthinkable” scenarios

This scenario category is named after the eponymous May 1945 British plan ordered by Winston Churchill, which entailed an Allied Forces attack on the Soviet Union after the defeat of Nazi Germany. Since the plan was as its name suggests, unthinkable, the next two scenarios seem very unlikely to happen, but are worth to be mentioned for an exhaustive view.

The first one would be **The Republic of Moldova's European integration by unifying with Romania**. The current government has recently accepted reforms that draw it away from Russia and closer to Romania. The clearest example is changing the official language of the country from “Moldovan” (a Soviet invention meant to create an artificial ethnic divide) to Romanian.⁸ Besides the clear ethnic and linguistic links between the populations of the two countries, Romania is currently the Republic of Moldova's main commercial partner,⁹ donating significant funds for modernization,¹⁰ infrastructural and energy¹¹ projects in the country, meant to reduce Chisinau's dependency on Moscow. According to recent polls, **around a third of Moldovans support the unification with**

⁷ Thomas de Waal, “A Fragile Stability in Moldova”. Carnegie Europe, May 10, 2022, URL: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/87099>

⁸ “Moldovan parliament approves law on Romanian language”. Reuters, March 16, 2023, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldovan-parliament-approves-law-romanian-language-2023-03-16/>

⁹ “Romania, our country's main trading partner: Igor Grosu: More than 1,500 investors are operating successfully”. Radio Moldova, February 22, 2023, URL: <https://radiomoldova.md/p/6644/romania-principalul-partener-comercial-al-tarii-noastre-igor-grosu-pestea-1-500-de-investitori-activeaza-cu-succes>

¹⁰ Vitalie Călugăreanu, “Romania's full support for the Republic of Moldova”. Deutsche Welle, March 23, 2023, URL: <https://www.dw.com/ro/sprijin-total-din-partea-rom%C3%A2niei-pentru-republica-moldova/a-65095276>

¹¹ “Romania Starts Sending Natural Gas to Moldova Through Pipeline”. Radio Free Europe, December 5, 2022, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-gas-supply-moldova-ukraine-war/32162977.html>

Romania,¹² the same figures being registered vice versa,¹³ when looking at Romania's support for uniting with Moldova.

There is an ever-increasing percentage in the Republic of Moldova, not necessarily out of a rising national emancipation aspiration, but more like seeing Romania as a lifeboat in the current crisis situation that the country is, both economically and geopolitically. A unification would entail a European integration process from within Romania, which would be swifter and would be realized while Moldova is already considered an EU territory. Since the majority in neither of the two countries supports this scenario, it is highly unlikely, but not impossible, to see it happening.

Another scenario which has been very little discussed in Western media, some even labelling it as a possible Kremlin propaganda narrative to denigrate Ukraine,¹⁴ is a **Ukrainian intervention in Transnistria**, which could eliminate a 30-year-long, Moscow-initiated frozen conflict in the Republic of Moldova. Nevertheless, Ukrainians have neither admitted nor denied this declaring that "solving the Transnistrian problem belongs only to the Moldovan side".¹⁵ Considering that Ukraine is in an all-out war against Russia, and that Transnistria is a separatist regime harbouring thousands of Russian soldiers, it is clear that Ukraine has had this option on its agenda since February 24th, 2022. Such a scenario, from a military perspective, is more likely to occur in the event of a great Russian defeat, which would permit opening a second frontline in Transnistria. While defeating Transnistria should not be a great challenge for Ukraine, there are other geopolitical factors to consider.

Firstly, one of Ukraine's main advantages is its international image, mainly its rightful perception as a victim of Russian aggression. In the case of a Ukrainian attack on Transnistria, even a justified/provoked one, Ukraine could be portrayed as an aggressor and lose its credibility and public support in many nations. It could also cause other issues, since legally speaking, Ukraine would be attacking one of the Republic of Moldova's *de jure* territories. Secondly, the **Moldovan side is unlikely to accept a Ukrainian intervention**, as it does not want such a process on its territory over which it has no control. That could lead to great internal problems, such as social upheavals from pro-Russian citizens outside of Transnistria or to another refugee crisis that Chisinau would have to deal with, (in a brutal economic crisis out of all situations).

Recently, at the European leaders' summit from June 1, 2023, that took place in the Republic of Moldova, President Zelensky expressed his clearest intention so far, of solving the Transnistrian issue. He declared the following: "why is the Russian contingent still in Transnistria? The Kremlin only needs it to one day to "unfreeze" an attack on Moldova. How much longer will Europe put up with this? The question is 30 years old. It deserves an answer. There should be no place for any frozen or hot war on our continent!".¹⁶ Ukraine is still keeping Transnistria in its sight and it remains to be seen whether Chisinau will be open to looking for solutions on the separatism issue with its neighbour.

¹² "Survey: Majority of Moldovans support EU membership, but not union with Romania", G4Media, April 7, 2023, URL: <https://www.g4media.ro/sondaj-majoritatea-cetatenilor-moldova-sustin-aderarea-la-ue-dar-nu-si-unirea-cu-romania.html>

¹³ "POLL What Romanians think about the union with the Republic of Moldova". G4Media, May 4, 2023, URL: <https://www.g4media.ro/sondaj-ce-cred-romanii-despre-unirea-cu-republica-moldova-ce-parere-au-despre-maia-sandu-si-ce-spun-despre-eventuala-invazie-a-rusiei-ar-trebui-sa-ajute-romania-militar-statul-moldoveean.html>

¹⁴ "The narratives about Transnistria draw public attention away from Russia's plans to destabilize Moldova and its defeats in Ukraine". Veridica.ro, March 1, 2023, URL: <https://www.veridica.ro/en/acf/the-narratives-about-transnistria-draw-public-attention-away-from-russias-plans-to-destabilize-moldova-and-its-defeats-in-ukraine>

¹⁵ "Moscow accuses Kyiv of increasing military presence near the border with the Transnistrian region. Podolyak: "Never listen to the Russian Defence Ministry"". Radio Moldova, February 23, 2023, URL: <https://radiomoldova.md/p/6759/moscova-acuza-kievul-ca-sporeste-prezenta-militara-in-apropiere-de-granita-cu-regiunea-transnistreana-podoleak--nu-ascultati-niciodata-ministerul-ru>

¹⁶ "Zelenskyi in Moldova named three steps on how Europe can help Ukraine win". Evropeiskaya Pravda, June 1, 2023, URL: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2023/06/1/7162836/>

If this unlikely scenario were to happen, assuming Moldova would be supported in dealing with the subsequent refugee crisis and with the reintegration process, it would help create a reintegrated country in which Russia would have significantly lower power grips. Either way, if it wants a European future, **the Republic of Moldova will have to find a solution to its dispute with Transnistria**, whether it is a diplomatic or a military one.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The Republic of Moldova benefits from a great window of opportunity to join the EU and this comes with a real existential stake for the determining its democratic future, prosperity, and freedom. What seemed as an unthinkable prospect just a few years ago, it is now a clear possibility, as we are witnessing the greatest and most accelerated European integration process in the history of the European Union.

The Republic of Moldova is a country with a population of 2.6 million who, unlike Ukraine, is not in an active war and thus it should be easier to deliver on reforms for integration. While the nation has a government that is determined to follow a European path and that has made tremendous reforms in that sense, **there is a sense of volatility**, and the Chisinau leadership can change from pro-Russian to pro-European from one election to another. Therefore, time is of the essence, and as the timeframe becomes shorter, it is possible that the EU will look towards an acceleration of the integration process, while the Republic of Moldova will start thoroughly analysing all options on the table. In the end, the Republic of Moldova will have to find a solution to the **Transnistrian issue, integrate Gagauzia with the rest of the country, counter the remaining influence of the oligarchs-in-exile and tackle Russian disinformation**.

Ukraine's counteroffensive measures and resistance to Russian bombardments, especially during the upcoming winter, will prove decisive not only for the war outcome in itself, but also for the European integration roadmap of both Kyiv and Chisinau. The Republic of Moldova's fate hangs in the balance and a Ukrainian failure will trickle down to the small nation as well.

Looking at the larger geopolitical framework, these European integration efforts are quintessential to the defence of a principle: the right of a free, democratic country to choose its path and future, regardless of the imperialistic geopolitical ambitions of another actor (Russia). The Republic of Moldova, but also countries other EU-aspiring post-Soviet nations, have more than a duty towards the welfare of their citizens and fighting for a better future. The Republic of Moldova could prove that there is a light at the end of the grey zone, one that is forged by determination and the strong belief in the shared values of democracy.

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¹⁷ "Ukraine's accession talks need bold action in Kyiv and Brussels". EPC.eu, March 24, 2023, URL: <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Ukraines-accession-talks-need-bold-action-in-Kyiv-and-Brussels~4f3f1c>

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