

## CHAPTER 5

# Republic of Moldova

## The Challenges of a Periphery's Shifting Identity, from the Russian Federation's Sphere of Influence to EU Accession

Nicolae Toderaş

*National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest*

Daniel Pascal

*National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest*

### Abstract

In this chapter, Moldova's EU path is analysed from a historiographical perspective, emphasizing recent developments. A hypothesis about the political elite's view of Moldova's irreversible EU accession process was explored in nine structured interviews with political leaders. The discussion revolved around seven core elements, including their perception of the EU and the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Moldova–EU relations. The analysis reveals that Moldova's intensified EU relations result largely from shifting regional contexts rather than

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being driven by internal political elites. For Moldova, the EU is seen as a peace guarantor and internal policy standard. While the EU alignment appears irreversible, reservations exist about the pace of reform during EU negotiations, particularly if the government changes. Overall, internal political determination is key to overcoming Moldova's peripheral EU status.

**Keywords:** Republic of Moldova, EU accession process, Eastern Partnership

## Introduction

This chapter presents the evolution of deepening relations between the Republic of Moldova (RM) and the European Union over the last two decades, focusing on the last ten years, especially following the application of the EU–RM Association Agreement (AA). We present the idea of in-depth cooperation with the EU within the limits of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for the post-Soviet space where, at the time of the AA, accession to the EU was not certain. The evolution of events related to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia brought radical changes in the sense of Moldova obtaining the status of candidate and the initiation of the pre-accession screening and negotiation process, which had not been foreseen at all in the former Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework. The main geopolitical events are presented and analysed in the chapter, with a focus on the main turning points in Moldova–EU relations.

The analysis examines the gradual change of Moldova's geopolitical identity in the last decade, within the theoretical perspective of renegotiations of centre–periphery relations, with Moldova going from the status of a peripheral country under the influence of Russia to one under the influence of the EU. Thus, we present the gradualness of this process from the perspective of centre–periphery relations of an economic and political nature. The paradox is that if the process of EU expansion to the East is carried out to the end (in the sense of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine becoming member states one day), then, from a geographical point of view, the Republic of Moldova will no longer be a peripheral state of the EU but will be located at the limits of the geographical centre. The paradox of changing the geographical nature of the periphery is in line with the consideration specified by the editors of this volume in the conceptual chapter: ‘in the context

of the EU integration process, each enlargement wave has changed the meaning of “EU periphery” (see [Chapter 1](#)). From this point of view, it is important to periodically assess how the perceptions of political leaders change once the processes of EU enlargement towards Eastern Europe advance. In this regard, the analysis focuses on how the vision and aspirations towards EU accession of the Republic of Moldova are promoted by the political parties and the main political actors from the government and the opposition. Thus, the analysis aims to capture and interpret aspects of politicians’ perception relating to the evolution of things in the last period (especially war, but also other overlapping crises). The interviews target both political actors involved today in the European integration process and also those who were involved in the process of rethinking the development vector of Moldova in the past.

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part is dedicated to a brief literature review over the last decade. This is undertaken considering the main conceptual elements specific to this volume. In the second part, the analysis focuses on the main issues specific to the Republic of Moldova’s trajectory in relation to the EU. While all steps since 1991 are reviewed, the focus of the analysis is on the last decade. This combination of the historical approach and analysis of the perceptions of current political leaders builds on the results of structured interviews during the fact-finding period.

## **Literature Review on the Prospect of Moldova’s EU Accession**

The literature on the European path of the Republic of Moldova has been quite diverse in recent times. In the 2000s, the topic was rather dealt with by internal epistemic communities and rarely by external ones. However, since 2010, the level of interest of external epistemic communities, especially in the EU, has increased considerably. The number of monographs, articles, chapters in thematic volumes, and grey literature analyses focused on the evolution of the European pathway of Moldova has multiplied.

The Republic of Moldova was initially treated as a peripheral area, at the confluence of Russia’s ‘crepuscular’ influence but also of the attractiveness of the EU, where it experienced a prevalent identity confusion that kept it stuck between the Soviet heritage and aspirations to get closer to the EU (Schmidtke & Chira-Pascanut, 2008; Harbo, 2010).

Due to the lack of domestic political will to take decisive steps towards the EU, but also to the limited willingness of the EU to give it a definite prospect of accession, by 2009 Moldova was seen as a blocked country, caught between two poles of influence (Korosteleva, 2010; Danii, 2011).

However, over time, analyses and studies have also diversified and focused on specific issues relating to the regulatory, economic, and social changes taking place in the Republic of Moldova as a result of the deepening of relations with the EU, both in the EaP and in the implementation of the AA (Nizhnikau, 2019; Bușcăneanu, 2021). These analyses focus either on a generalist treatment of transformations or on specific areas or issues.

Another particularity of the specialized bibliography consulted is the fact that the Republic of Moldova is being treated as a package with other EaP countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, or Belarus (Korosteleva, 2012; Bruns et al., 2016; Davies & Vági, 2023). Most analyses focus on how the EaP produces transformative effects in each country in the region, notably through AAs after their entry into force in 2016. For example, the most common analyses of the ENP cover the following areas: border control and migration management (Merheim-Eyre, 2017; Nizhnikau, 2019); internal legislative adjustments to implement EU law (Khvorostiankina, 2014; Tofan, 2016); environmental protection (Nizhnikau, 2019); democratic consolidation (Nilsson & Silander, 2016); education (Toderaș & Stăvaru, 2018; Makarychev & Butnaru Troncotă, 2022; Toderaș 2022); raising awareness around deepening relations with the EU (Torres-Adán, 2021; Burlyuk et al., 2023); strengthening security in the region following the second invasion of Ukraine by Russia (Kaunert & de Deus Pereira, 2023); and the regulation of secessionist conflicts in the region (Albulescu, 2022). It is often stated in these analyses that there is a need to streamline or adjust institutions, approaches, and instruments applicable to ENP countries to their domestic aspirations, needs, and capabilities (Kostanyan, 2017), including by changing the strategic approach for the region (Kaunert & de Deus Pereira, 2023). As some opt for deeper and accelerated rapprochement with the EU, including becoming EU members, others simply diversify their economic relations. Recent analyses also focus on how Russia uses pressure tactics including economic blackmail against EaP countries (Samokhvalov, 2021), especially in the context of the implementation of AAs (Bușcăneanu, 2021) or in the particular

situation of the Republic of Moldova (Vardanean, 2018; Deen & Zweers, 2022). Pressure or blackmail tactics are applied by Russia to keep these countries within its sphere of influence and to counter their rapprochement with the EU.

The literature reviewed shows that the change in political discourse is dependent on the evolution of the external context but also on the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. Namely, during the first years of independence the focus of said discourse gradually shifted from democratization and preservation of indigenous ethno-cultural values towards liberalization and ownership of European identity. The literature in question recurrently addresses this shift, considering the following key phenomena in shaping the political discourse on the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. The first phenomenon is the establishment of a concurrent ambivalent narrative: integration into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and, more recently, into the Eurasian Economic Union, but also into the EU (Tofan, 2018). For the period 1990–2009, the political elites' concept of ambitious integration was dominated by public discourse. On the one hand, this created stability in relation to the old cooperation arrangements with Russia, which are still a centre of attraction for the Republic of Moldova (Hagemann, 2013; Dragneva, 2018); on the other hand, this was a chance to seize the new opportunities offered by the EU, as well as by certain member states. The EaP has contributed to the gradual unravelling of dependencies on Russia but also hesitation over whether to accept being part of other alternative economic integration structures such as the Eurasian Economic Union (Tofan, 2018; Kobayashi, 2019; Bușcăneanu, 2021).

The second recurrent phenomenon in the literature refers to the fact that, as in other states of the region, Moldova is driven by a dichotomy between the left and the right on the definition of the foreign policy vector (Prisac, 2015; Turco & Moșneaga, 2021). Talk of social mobilization in support of the aspiration of European integration has been shaped since the mid-1990s by the political elites of the opposition parties at the time. Thus, political elites located on the centre right chose to strengthen the vector of the Republic of Moldova's enhanced relations with the EU, while those on the centre left chose to maintain relations with Russia and step up cooperation within the CIS.

Some analyses also point to the fact that the ideological dichotomy is reinforced by the cleavage between the majority and the minority.

Most of the population is Euro-optimistic and supports centre-right or moderate left parties, and ethnic minorities are prone to be Euro-sceptic and to show support for left-wing parties or those that promote the narratives propagated by Russia (Kosienkowski & Schreiber, 2014). Some authors argue that the source of Euroscepticism for ethnic minorities, being predominantly Russian-speaking, is the mass media supported by Russia, leading to anti-EU or anti-Western sentiment (Deen & Zweers, 2022).

The formation and adjustment of ideological concepts conducive to the European integration of Moldova is also seen in terms of external influences, from both the EU and Russia. Thus, on the side of European political families the most influential impact in the case of Moldova was the European People's Party (EPP), and the congruence of Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) with the ideologies of internal political parties was rather weak (Shagina, 2017). From Russia, significant political influence is exercised through political parties or leaders challenging Moldova's rapprochement with the EU (Nizhnikau, 2016).

Since 2000, the Public Policy Institute of the Republic of Moldova has instituted the Public Opinion Barometer (POB). As the main instrument for measuring public opinion, this also contains a few items from which the dynamics of popular support can be inferred in the process of the Republic of Moldova's European integration. The European integration of Moldova is supported by a significant share of the population of the country (Turco & Moşneaga, 2021). Carried out every six months, spring and autumn, the POB is identified in the literature as the most credible and consistent source of primary data on the societal state of the Republic of Moldova. In our analysis, we use POB data to present the dynamics of public opinion in favour of possible EU membership.

## Methodological Approach

The chapter focuses on the question of whether, at this stage of the EU accession process, from the perspective of domestic political elites, the integration of the Republic of Moldova is irreversible, assuming that it was an external factor that enabled the granting of candidate status. The hypothesis is justified by the fact that, although by the time of the Russian Federation's military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022

there were several opportunities to create the conditions for application for EU membership, the Moldovan authorities were reluctant to take the necessary actions in order to maximize these opportunities. As the history of EU enlargement shows, the progress of rapprochement, deepening relations, and subsequent pre-accession oscillates between acceleration and deceleration. In this respect, irreversibility focuses on the fact that what has been achieved in relation to the Copenhagen Criteria is maintained regardless of government alternatives or other internal or foreign policy contexts. It is in this light that this chapter aims to analyse just how irreversible this process is, based on the commitment of the political elite to strengthening relations with the EU and in a context of Moldova's self-representation as being an EU periphery.

The analysis is based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with representatives of the political elites and on secondary sources. We conducted nine online interviews, in spring 2023, with key political leaders in Moldova about the process of European integration. The aim was to ensure the representation of a diverse demographic, including age, political background, membership in political parties, and ideological leanings (Appendix, [Table A5.1](#)). All interviewees chose to have their responses and identification anonymized.

The interviews were structured on seven key questions – five common within the book framework and two adapted to the country. The variables used to define the key questions as well as the analysis criteria and perception indicators are:

- perception of the EU;
- major problems or critical circumstances experienced which have led to the deepening of relations with the EU;
- major achievements or failures of the Republic of Moldova with the EU;
- consequences of the military invasion of Ukraine by Russia for relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU;
- the irreversibility of Moldova's EU accession process;
- the existence of alternatives to accession to the EU, if things went wrong in the future;
- what the EU should do to make Moldova more attached to, integrated into, or aligned with EU values.

The main limit of the qualitative methodology was the need for balanced representation of political parties in the 2021–2025 parliamentary term. While necessary steps were taken, the study encountered limitations as members of the Action and Solidarity Party were most receptive to the interviews; members of the other three parliamentary parties strongly refused to be interviewed.

### **The First Steps of the Republic of Moldova towards the EU**

The first step towards the EU was undertaken in 1994 when the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, which entered into force only in 1998, was signed. The entry into force of this agreement allowed for an opportunity to assume European identity between February and November 1999 by establishing the Republic of Moldova's assertion of its advancement to cooperation with the EU as its foreign policy driver. The first courageous steps were taken to move away from Russia's sphere of influence and to move closer to the EU, by initiating a structured dialogue with the EU institutions (Interview 2). Thus, the governance programme proposed by the Sturza cabinet focused on initiating and intensifying the steps ahead of European integration.

As a result of the change in the narrative of the political elites in the late 1990s, a change in perceptions of European integration also occurred in society. The Public Opinion Barometer carried out in 2000 by the Institute of Public Policy indicated that for 38 per cent of respondents, the Republic of Moldova's external orientation had to be towards the EU, for 32 per cent it had to be towards the EU and the CIS, while 20 per cent opted for the CIS alone and 10 per cent were unwilling or uncertain how to respond (IPP, 2000, p. 53). That year's barometer also indicated that Moldova's European integration should focus most on the economic sector (77 per cent), followed by the regulatory sector (47 per cent), education and science (44 per cent), and politics (43 per cent).

After the fall of the Sturza government (December 1999), a moderate stagnation in relations with the EU began. The subsequent government displayed another view on the relationship with the EU:

At the time in the Republic of Moldova, there were other things to consider in relation to cooperation with the EU such as asymmetric trade,



benefits it could obtain from the EU, etc. Also, throughout the 2000s, the Republic of Moldova was not ready to separate from the Eastern area, from its relations with Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the CIS space. (Interview 8)

In this context, from March 2001 to November 2003, with the acquisition of power by the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, relations with the EU were frozen while those with Russia intensified.

The rejection of the implementation of the Russian Draft Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the State Structure of a United State in Moldova (November 2003) was a decisive turning point at which the Republic of Moldova's dependence on the Russia came to an end. All political leaders interviewed identified this moment as a critical step in establishing Moldova's dependence on the option of the path of European integration, though there was no unanimity as to the reasons for this turning point: several political leaders interviewed, especially those who had been involved in political activities at the time, considered that the rationality of the decision springs from the desire to safeguard the political power of the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, rather than from any potential benefits of European integration (Interview 6). Most of the political leaders interviewed considered that the danger of the disappearance of Moldova as a state persists and has even increased since 2014 (in the context of the hybrid warfare established by Russia after the first invasion of Ukraine and the signing of the AA). Examples include following reasoning:

When the Republic of Moldova is in an area of influence of Russia, it is crucial for us, as government, to escape these influences. The threats related to Transnistria, and the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia, including those risks of overturning the situation in the Republic of Moldova, are dangerous for us. (Interview 4)

In the opinion of the political leaders interviewed, this danger will be eliminated with Moldova's effective accession to the EU.

From December 2003 to the end of 2007, Moldova's cooperation with the EU gradually intensified. Some flagship results were achieved during this period on the irreversibility of the deepening of Moldova's relations with the EU, according to interview findings:

- The signature of the EU–Moldova Action Plan (EUMAP) in February 2005;

- The adoption by the Moldovan parliament of the Declaration on the European Integration of the Republic of Moldova on 24 March 2005; the fact that the Declaration was voted for unanimously by all the political factions of that parliamentary term was of considerable symbolic significance in the firmness of the path of European integration of the Republic of Moldova (Interview 8);
- The initiation of market economy reforms to gradually move the Moldovan economy towards compliance with the second EU accession criterion.

The decision of the political leaders in 2005 to change the foreign policy path by taking on Moldova's wish to join the EU was legitimized by clear public support. For example, the Public Opinion Barometer of December 2005 (IPP, n.d.) shows that 64.3 per cent of people questioned would have voted for Moldova's accession to the EU if a referendum had been held. Only 8.5 per cent of respondents indicated that they would have voted against and 19.5 per cent were not decided to opt for accession, while 3.2 per cent would not have taken part in a referendum on such a subject and 4.8 per cent chose not to respond.

Public legitimacy was initially used by political leaders to implement the provisions of the EUMAP, which was reflected in the reforms needed to strengthen the rule of law and economic liberalization. However, between 2007 and 2009 the implementation processes of the plan's provisions slowed down and inter-institutional cooperation diminished. Most interviewees pointed out that the slowing down and subsequently stagnation of the implementation of EUMAP provisions is one of the main failures of the Republic of Moldova in relation to the EU. For example, the lack of alignment with EU single market rules and standards maintained sectoral dependencies on the CIS market (Interview 5), while Russia used blackmail tactics with the Republic of Moldova because of the change in foreign policy vector.

As a result of the slowdown in the implementation of EUMAP-specific actions, the pressure on the political elite aspiring to intensify relations with the EU has increased considerably compared with previous periods. The degree of social appeal against decisions to slow down Moldova's rapprochement with the EU has also increased massively, which has fuelled those in opposition to call more actively and publicly for reforms to deepen relations with the EU. Data from the Public Opinion Barometer show that the peak of public support for

the possible accession of Moldova to the EU was in November 2007, when records showed 76 per cent support; in the following two years the share was 71 per cent (2008) and 66.5 per cent (2009).

The transformations that took place in the 2000–2009 in establishing the external vector of the Republic of Moldova towards EU accession were perceived by interviewees in the 30–40 age group as a longitudinal country project with a strong identity attachment. The consideration that ‘EU integration has always been a high priority for the Republic of Moldova, and most people supporting this priority considered themselves to be European by law’ (Interview 7) is illustrative of this change of political reasoning. A clear finding of our research is the refrain that there is no civilization model for the Republic of Moldova other than a European one being engraved in the collective consciousness.

### **The Challenges of the Reopening of Moldova’s relations with the EU: The Disappointment Decade**

The period following the change in government in 2009 was one of both political change and also the reopening of Moldova’s relations with the EU, as well as with most member states. As a result, the processes of rapprochement with the EU intensified significantly, in both bilateral and multilateral cooperation relations. The initial period of cooperation on the EaP platform, therefore, coincided with the period of change in the political orientation of the Republic of Moldova, which coincided with the desires of society.

The first years of the cooperation of the Republic of Moldova on the EaP platform are evaluated a success story, which culminated with the signing of the AA on 27 June 2014 in Brussels. On 1 July 2016, the AA began to be fully applied. Before signing the AA, the parliament of the Republic of Moldova voted for a declaration in support of the European integration process, in Article 1 of which it was stipulated that ‘The accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union is a strategic objective and an irreversible process’ (Parliament Decision no. 274 of 14 November 2013). The declaration represents an additional guarantee regarding the determination to exit from the zone of influence of Russia and complete all the necessary steps for joining the EU.

From an economic point of view, the main success of the 2009–2019 period was the change in direction of Moldova's trade balance with the EU. There is a decline in the intensity of economic disputes with Russia (Bușcăneanu, 2021, p. 638). The use by Russia of economic blackmail tactics by imposing import restrictions on sensitive agri-food proved to be misjudged. The effect of these tactics was to diversify markets, but also to step up the adoption and implementation processes of quality standards in line with EU standards – the same approach taken for more than three decades also in terms of gas supply to the Republic of Moldova.

The most emblematic results of this decade, as confirmed by most of the interviewees, relate to visa liberalization; stepping up macro-economic assistance; diversification of market outlets; and the gradual reduction of economic and energy dependency on Russia. Thus, it can be said that in this decade the EU's transformative power over domestic public institutions and policies was exponential and the EU was 'the most important motor energizing the modernization of the country' (Interview 8). The political leaders interviewed highlighted that this manifested itself in areas such as rule-of-law reform (despite major setbacks); countering organized crime; adjustment of administrative practices based on the principles of good governance; convergence of production standards with those of the EU internal market; upward convergence issues; and territorial reintegration (as the EU became part of the 5 + 2 negotiating format on the settlement of the Transnistria conflict). The following consideration is illustrative: 'The EU was the first partner that solved any problems we have faced in the last decade' (Interview 8). Although the EU exercises transformative power over the Republic of Moldova, the view emerged that the scale and consistency of the changes depend largely on administrative capacity but also on political understanding and will (Interview 3; Interview 9). On upward convergence, the EU's transformative power focused on adjusting internal axiological landmarks specific to a society's patriarchal values and unfriendly to the environment and diversity to be closer to those of the EU. This highlighted the gradual improvement of the situation in horizontal objectives of the EU, such as gender equality, sustainable development, and reduction of social exclusion and discrimination.

The positive dynamics of the evolution of relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, as well as the history of Moldova's

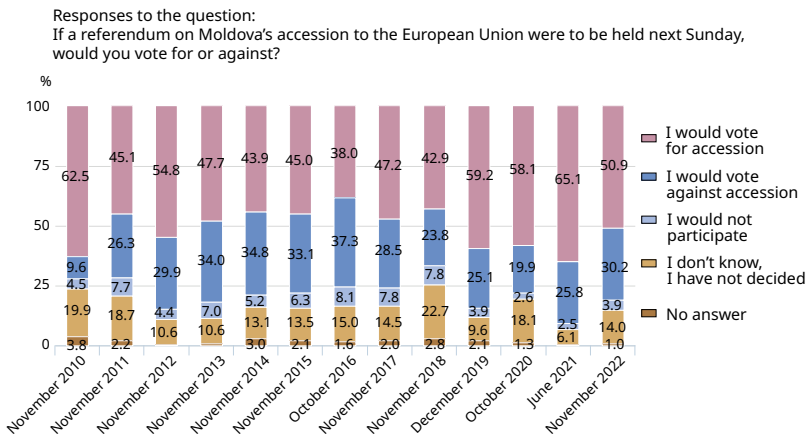
success in the Eastern Partnership, were quickly replaced by radically different characteristics. The corruption of the highest echelons of power and the withdrawal of a billion dollars from the banking system of the Republic of Moldova created an unprecedented situation and caused significant damage to the economic and political stability of the state. This led to the undermining of the confidence of European partners. It had a negative impact on the popularity of the European foreign policy vector of the country's development and served as an impetus for an even stricter delimitation of Moldovan society along the East–West principle (Stercul, 2021, p. 92). The political leaders interviewed validated these failures, in which the Republic of Moldova departed from the Copenhagen Criteria. Phenomena such as state capture by oligarchic interest groups; perpetuating and amplifying corrupt practices; degradation of legal institutions; erosion of political culture and media freedom; and the weakening of administrative capacity in various areas have led to stagnation in the harmonization of internal legislation, concepts, and regulations with those of the EU. According to the opinion of the political leaders interviewed, the causes of failure lie in the political class, which did not have the ability to understand the implications of deepening relations with the EU and left them under the grip of oligarchic interest groups. Thus, the causes of failure related to administrative capacity but also to political will opposed to the normative nature of the EU.

Symbolically, it is clear from the analysis of the above-mentioned refrain that a fundamental failure of this decade is about discrediting the label set out in 2012, seeing the Republic of Moldova as a part of the success story of the EU. The following considerations are indicative of the extent of this disappointment:

as a result, we have experienced, both as citizens who have European aspirations and as observers of European Union policies, a great disappointment with the result of bank fraud, several crimes that have affected not only Moldova's security but also regional security. (Interview 1)

with pro-European leaders in government, the whole political class is discredited internally and externally. Disappointment is still felt. (Interview 3)

In the context of the deterioration of the domestic political climate as well as relations with the EU, public support for the possible accession of Moldova has steadily decreased. As [Figure 5.1](#) shows, the negative peak was recorded in 2016 when the share of those who would vote for accession fell to 38 per cent, the lowest in the whole period since 2000. The decrease is due to the discrediting of political parties that had promoted the pro-EU message and the link between internal instability and insecurity regarding the situation in the EU. In these conditions, public opinion perceived that the national interest in joining the EU had been sabotaged by pro-European political forces. Against this background, the growth of Euroscepticism must also be associated with the intensification of narratives promoted by Russia through the Russian-language media, some political representatives, and even the Orthodox Church (Kosienkowski & Schreiber, 2014; Deen & Zweers, 2022). These narratives focused mostly on the fact that European integration would lead to an increase in corruption, the oligarchizing of society, the privatization of public services, and even the depravity of society. All of these narratives were presented in contrast to the stability and prosperity guaranteed by Russia in relation to the former republics of the USSR. On the other hand, left-wing political forces presented the alternative of deepening relations with Russia and joining the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU).



**Figure 5.1:** Dynamics of public opinion on the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU.

Data source: IPP (n.d.).

Against this backdrop of popular dissatisfaction, in November 2016, Eurosceptic political leader Igor Dodon won the presidential elections, which later established a tense climate between the leading pro-European parties and those opposing the intensification of relations with the EU. Against this background, even though the governments that succeeded from 2016 and 2020 were not Eurosceptic in their political configuration, no substantial steps were taken in deepening relations with the EU by implementing the provisions of the AA. As in the case of the EUMAP in the previous decade, there have been delays since the start of the implementation of the AA, particularly as regards the harmonization of legislation and standards (Interview 5).

A certain category of political elites which formed alternative political platforms, in particular young people with no political experience, worked to shape the social mobilization narrative towards European integration. They followed the aspirations of the Euro-optimistic public opinion quota and counteracted governments' intentions after 2016 to divert the European path of the Republic of Moldova: 'efforts were needed from society to prevent the creation of a state that hampers European integration' (Interview 7). As a result of this effort to recover the disappointed quota, there was a chain of remarkable results. The first came between June and November 2019, when a cabinet of ministers led by Maia Sandu was sworn into office. The second result was in December 2020 when Maia Sandu was elected president of the Republic of Moldova and the third result was winning the July 2021 parliamentary elections, resulting in the Action and Solidarity Party gaining a large majority. This sequence of events put the Republic of Moldova back on track for European integration and accelerated the implementation of the provisions of the AA.

Following the democratic changes of 2016, EU support increased and diversified, in terms of both macro-financial assistance and direct technical assistance or various forms of development or civil protection assistance. For example, from the perspective of civil protection assistance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the leaders interviewed appreciated that EU support had been substantial. On this topic, EU solidarity with the Republic of Moldova was noted not only in the speed with which help was given but also in the consistency and pre-emption of deliveries of medical products and preparations, personal protective equipment, and vaccines.

While this was a period of major opportunities largely missed, its events and achievements made Moldova resilient to major societal crises and challenges. As argued above, towards the end of the reference period the European course of the Republic of Moldova was restored. After Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, Moldova took a new step along its European path. In this context, the resilience resulting from the past decade's experiences has helped to overcome challenges much larger and more complex than those experienced previously (such as maintaining statehood and territorial integrity; resilience and counter-acting hybrid warfare, etc.). In this context, as of 24 February 2022, a new window of opportunity has opened for the Republic of Moldova, which has the potential to lead towards Moldova's accession to the EU.

### **A Window of Major Opportunities?**

In addition to mitigating the immediate effects of the invasion of Ukraine through the EU's humanitarian assistance and civil protection instruments (effective management of refugee flows, supply of energy resources and related equipment, food and hygiene, etc.), support also targeted the protection of EaP platform states vis-à-vis Russia. In fact, the window of opportunity meant obtaining EU candidate status and starting negotiations on accession chapters. Given the state of play in meeting the commitments of the AA and the accumulated backlog over time, this strategic action was difficult to conceive in a counterfactual scenario based on pre-invasion data. However, considering the decisive step of Ukraine and also the calls for solidarity of some member states, the Republic of Moldova applied for EU membership on 3 March 2022. The request was endorsed by the European Commission on 17 June 2022, and the European Council of 23 June 2022 granted the Republic of Moldova the status of candidate country to the EU.

The political leaders interviewed indicated that the effective use of this window of opportunity was due to the domestic political context: the government's focus on addressing the accumulated backlog and speeding up the current period of action. A very successful overview of the context was set out in Interview 9:

Obtaining the status of candidate country was due to an accumulation of factors. The war has been a catalyst. This was clearly not the case for pro-EU governance, neither with war nor without. Efforts were also



made by the Republic of Moldova on the implementation of reforms and an enormous effort on the diplomatic side.

In this context, amplified by a high degree of emotion brought about by the military invasion, unanimous support has been generated among member states for offering the Republic of Moldova candidate status, leading to the start of negotiations on the 35 accession chapters. The current situation of broad political support from all EU countries looks completely different to 2014–2015 (Interview 3). One interview finding was that the implementation of the provisions of the AA has accelerated over the years 2020–2022. Other new actions specific to the application for membership have also been implemented at a rapid pace: such as the preparation of replies to the European Commission's questionnaire, the implementation of the measures proposed by the European Commission in its Opinion on Moldova's application for EU membership (nine recommendations), and the preparations for initiating the negotiation of accession chapters.

In support of the start of pre-accession negotiations, subject to the fulfilment of the nine recommendations put forward by the European Commission, on 19 April 2023 the European Parliament issued a resolution reaffirming its support for the Republic of Moldova in the context of attempts by external forces to destabilize the domestic political climate. The Moldovan authorities are also making use of the platform created by the European Political Community (EPC). Understood within a broader background, the EPC platform is identified as an opportunity to strengthen multilateral mutual structured dialogue, align internal public policies with those of the EU, and reduce asymmetries between member states and other candidate countries (Interviews 3 and 8). In recognition of this effort, the second EPC Summit took place in Chisinau on 1 June 2023. The nine recommendations were largely fulfilled over the course of 2023. As a result of this, on 14 December 2023, the European Council decided to open negotiations for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU.

In terms of the political mobilization message, the timeframe for effective EU membership is 2030, with negotiations to be completed in 2027, at the latest in 2028. The interviews showed that the deadline set by the country's leaders – specifically, Maia Sandu – is feasible and possible to achieve. The commitment to the 2030 term for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession should serve as a motivation not just

for the political class but also for the entire public administration and society as a whole. It was stressed unanimously that Romania is the EU member state which most undeniably supports the achievement of this goal by providing the necessary technical support for the conduct of the pre-accession negotiations: 'The Republic of Moldova has two EU ambassadors, one from the Republic of Moldova, and the second one from Romania' (Interview 3). Other member states mentioning that they can support this are the Baltic trio, Poland, France, and Germany. What is noteworthy is that no political leader interviewed made a decisive decision on member states potentially opposed to the next step to accession. However, among the member states that could make pre-accession negotiations more difficult are the Nordic flank, Denmark and Sweden; the Netherlands; Spain from the southern flank; and Austria and Hungary from the Central European flank (the latter two identified as being affiliated with the Russia). The leaders interviewed were aware that during the negotiations there will be additional conditions that will make the process more difficult, but there is optimism that through negotiation and effectively addressing the issues at stake, these situations will be overcome.

Interestingly, to achieve this objective, from a political point of view, the decoupling of the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine will also be taken into account if circumstances so require. This consideration is particularly shared by the category of interviewed political leaders who hold or have held a position as minister of a portfolio with a major impact on relations with the EU:

I do not believe that we can talk about joining the package with Ukraine, lacking comfort with each other, we can't come as a package. Thus, accession must be seen by each country separately. (Interview 2)

In fact, from the viewpoint of those interviewed, the package negotiation with Ukraine would be largely conditional on the evolution of the situation in Ukraine and the process of peace and reconstruction, which will take quite a long time and many resources. Thus, some of the interviewed leaders noted that if Moldova is to carry out its negotiation process in a timely and sound manner, then it is fully feasible, regardless of the situation in Ukraine, to address the issues and responsibilities deriving from the negotiation process. Such positioning can be said to indicate that there is ambition to reach the desired EU membership, regardless of the evolution of the situation in Ukraine.

However, some interviewees believed that 2030 would depend largely on the evolution of the situation in Ukraine.

It was noted that as a result of the overlapping crises (COVID-19, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, exponential inflation, energy scarcity associated with very high costs, etc.), public opinion has been significantly affected. A key consideration in the interviews was that the EU was the first actor to offer and deliver support which is unconditional and delivered in time to mitigate the effects of these overlapping crises. However, even though the Moldovan authorities have made significant efforts to overcome these crises, the resilience of the population has been significantly eroded. Against this background, certain opposition parties (some led from the shadows by fugitive oligarchs from the Republic of Moldova) have explored citizens' grievances by organizing protests or sabotaging the authorities. As a result, the share of citizens supporting the European integration of the Republic of Moldova has decreased again. According to the data of the latest Public Opinion Barometer, in November 2021 only 51 per cent of interviewees would still vote for EU membership in the event of a referendum. As illustrated in Figure 5.1, the positive side of the picture is that the share of those who would vote against or are undecided has not increased significantly compared with the period 2013–2015. Through sensitive public policies, and also by involving the political elites in shaping the social mobilization narrative on European integration, the category of undetermined people may easily be recovered.

Steps have also been taken to strengthen attachment to the fundamental values of the EU to reduce the phenomenon of division and antagonization in society and to reduce ideological faults. For example, on 21 May 2023 the National Assembly 'European Moldova' was organized. A resolution was adopted at the National Assembly which contains in its first point the start of procedures to amend the constitution to definitively and irreversibly establish the accession to the EU. Parliament approved the resolution on 24 May 2023 (Parliament Decision no. 125 of 24 May 2023).

The political leaders interviewed unanimously considered that there was no alternative to the EU, regardless of the outcome of the situation in Ukraine or any internal political change. As the records of the choice of Moldovan citizens according to opinion polls show, EU membership is the only legitimate option for all political parties, even those that are Eurosceptic or anti-system. These considerations

support the idea that even if power is taken over the coming years by political forces opposing EU membership and promoting the deepening of relations with Russia or with other CIS member states, the European path of the Republic of Moldova will be not diverted but at most delayed or stopped for a short period of time. The following consideration is conclusive:

If the left-wing parties were to take power, the Republic of Moldova will remain in the EU. The war in Ukraine has led to the development of the USSR, CIS and EACU being forms of conserving USSR memories. (Interview 2)

It should be stressed that the attitude of all political leaders interviewed was optimistic and confident that, sooner or later, Moldova would become an EU member state.

Most of the political leaders interviewed considered that the country is already on the path to this irreversible conclusion, and spillover effects are a condition of the continuation along this path, even if this will fluctuate. A few minority positions focused on a prudent rather than an optimistic approach. In their view, the irreversible path depends very much on the situation in Ukraine: 'As long as Ukraine is pro-EU the risks for the Republic of Moldova are low. If something catastrophic occurs in Ukraine, the risks also increase for the Republic of Moldova' (Interview 6). Considerations relating to the irreversibility of the process were well argued, including the argument that the majority of Moldovan citizens already hold nationality of an EU member state (in particular Romania); that the share of remittances from the EU is overwhelmingly greater than that from the CIS; that the diaspora of the Republic of Moldova has become an important electoral actor; that the reforms implemented in recent years have produced wealth and trust in public institutions. At the same time, other considerations arise, such as 'We are ready to do everything we can to keep the European course paramount and irreversible' (Interview 4) or the need for 'Building institutions that will stand no matter who comes to government. It is much more complicated for any government coming to Chisinau to return course and reforms to 180 degrees' (Interview 9). Only a minority of interviewees took the view that the processes were reversible, particularly setting out arguments relating to internal political stability, but also to the rise of Euroscepticism within the EU (Interviews 5 and 7).

An endemic challenge for the next period is to improve control management over the whole territory of the Republic of Moldova. The main uncontrollable territorial area is the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) on the left bank of the Dniester, and the ATU of Gagauzia is partly controllable. The people of both ATUs stand against Moldova's accession to the EU and have strong affinities with the ideology promoted by Russia. In this respect, the political leaders interviewed recognized that mismanagement of this challenge could jeopardize negotiations on EU accession chapters. They were aware that, technically, accession negotiations will cover the entire territory of the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, serious steps will have to be taken to convince the people of those territories that Moldova's accession route is more advantageous than maintaining dependence on Russia.

As regards the role of the EU in strengthening attachment to EU values, most of the political leaders interviewed stated that while aid is visible, it is not sufficient. There is thus room for the EU to diversify its support to Moldova, mainly with a view to speeding up the fulfilment of the accession criteria and facilitating access to the EU's single market. According to the options set out, support must be targeted on various key aspects of empowerment or awareness, such as countering disinformation, supporting Russian-language media, informing farmers about agri-food rules specific to the EU single market, and promoting successful projects implemented in recent years. An important focus should be placed on projects to raise awareness of the various population groups, in particular the Eurosceptic population and the population in the aforementioned ATU areas. The following statement is evocative:

For the time being we are a divided society: due to the infiltration of the Moldovan information space by Russian propaganda, disinformation tools of Russia, the situation is still very divided. Every effort must continue to be made to inform citizens as much as possible. This is why the Action for European Moldova was launched. (Interview 4)

Also, increased funding from Erasmus, Horizon Europe, or Justice Program would certainly lead to stronger attachment to EU values. It should be noted that the choices made regarding the nature of the support did not reflect the meaning of sanctions at all, although at the time when the political leaders interviewed were often opposed to the

use of this form of support too, it was understood as a slowing down of the spirit of driving forward the reforms undertaken by the AA.

In conclusion, since February 2022 the Republic of Moldova has taken advantage of the window of opportunity generated by the military invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Despite the various challenges of the economic, social, political, and security nature of the state in the context of the hybrid warfare conducted by Russia against the Republic of Moldova, by the time of writing the Moldovan authorities had demonstrated that they are effectively managing all critical situations, as well as remaining alert in the implementation of the AA and the nine recommendations of the European Commission. It is expected that in the negotiation process on the accession chapters, Moldova will effectively address the challenge of formulating national ambitions on topics related to agriculture or territorial integrity. From this point of view, an evocative reasoning emphasizes that ‘the process is quite complex, a process which must take into account not only the specificities of the conditions imposed by the EU, but also the social and economic specificities within Moldova’ (Interview 1). Thus, the role of the ambitions of this country would be to generate ideological attachment among the other political forces in the event of their access to governance, in order to ensure continuity and irreversibility of European integration.

## Conclusions

Three decades ago, the Republic of Moldova was considered by the EU a geopolitical periphery because of its ambivalent position toward Russia’s sphere of influence. This geopolitical source of peripherality has led, in our view, to Moldova being decoupled from the processes of European integration from which Central European states and Baltic countries benefited after the dissolution of the USSR. The positive dynamics of Moldova’s relations with the EU are mainly due to the specific measures adopted by the EU (the EaP, and more recently the European Political Community).

The analysis shows that the direction of Moldova’s relations with the EU has been mainly due to changing regional contexts rather than the determination of political elites. Overall, various regional conflicts (such as in 1999 in Serbia, 2008 in Georgia, and 2014 and 2022 in Ukraine) generated opportunities to set the country on the path of European integration, i.e. to accelerate processes that a decade ago

were considered ideal. The findings of our analysis justify the expectation stated in the conceptual chapter of this book, that ‘challenging circumstances arising from the war in Ukraine will lead countries such as Ukraine and Moldova to perceive the EU as their primary guarantee against Russian aggression. Consequently, these countries may view the integration process as their principal focus in foreign policy’ (see [Chapter 1](#)).

According to the perception of the interviewees in the current context, a peace grant, followed by a provision of welfare and normative reference for domestic public policies through its transformative power over member states or third countries, is seen as the main benefit of Moldova’s accession to the EU. The deepening of Moldova’s relations with the EU is therefore aimed at maintaining the existence of Moldova as a state and guaranteeing the security and integrity of the state as a counterbalance to the constitutional military neutrality. This is why we did not manage to identify open sources of criticism, contestation, and Euroscepticism in political elites’ discourses. We have observed that for the political leaders interviewed, before actual accession to the EU, the deepening of Moldova’s relations has the main purpose of accelerating the modernization of internal public systems and policies.

Most of the political leaders interviewed were of the opinion that the process of rapprochement with the EU has become irreversible, not only declaratory (as stated in the 2005 Parliament Declaration) but also de facto. However, there are some reservations as to the actual irreversibility of this process, and it can be said that the doubts and caution expressed by the elites is a testimony to the fact that in their view the process is not quite decisively irreversible. The arguments put forward shed light on the fact that the EU accession process is variable and oscillates from one political juncture to another, nevertheless considering the possible reversibility of this juncture. The fact that Moldova has become a candidate country provides a possible counterweight to a dominantly Eurosceptic government, thus reducing the risk of disruption to institutionalized arrangements in accession negotiations. At the very least, by virtue of the dependencies created by the application of the provisions of the AA and of the commitments made in the negotiation process in the accession chapters, legacies and structural relations will continue to function at an institutional level irrespective of the electoral dynamics. Thus, the EU’s transformative power will remain

long term, as some of the respondents saw it, which will frustrate any intention to stop the process or to render it reversible.

Regardless of the political and regional security changes that may occur in the coming years, Moldova's accession to the EU cannot be completely stopped, but may at most be slowed down. In this respect, on the one hand, public opinion will have an important say and will create clear pressure on political elites or parties, whether they are Eurosceptic or Euro-optimistic. On the other hand, in the event of a possible change of government with Eurosceptic political forces gaining power, as over the last two decades which saw the use of tactics of economic blackmail, political coercion, or military incursions, the financial incentives granted by the EU will ensure that Moldova's European route is maintained. Our analysis shows that, as those interviewed unanimously agreed, there is currently no viable and credible alternative for the Republic of Moldova to joining the EU, regardless of the outcome of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia or a possible change of government. Moreover, with the deepening of the negotiations with the EU on the accession chapters, and also the potential ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia, it is expected that Eurosceptic political parties in the Republic of Moldova will also follow through with debates on ideological positions on specific commitments in each chapter of negotiations. Following the interpretation of the results collected, our hypothesis was largely validated. However, the feasibility of the 2030 timeframe for the effective accession of Moldova to the EU remains questionable, and this remains a topic to be further researched.

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# Appendix

**Table A5.1:** Interviews with Relevant Political Leaders

Interview code	Gender	Age bracket	Political function or previous political activity
Interview 1	M	21–40	Party president, former member of the Parliament
Interview 2	M	41–60	Minister and former chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament
Interview 3	F	21–40	Chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament
Interview 4	F	41–60	Chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament and former minister
Interview 5	M	21–40	Leading position of Parliament, leading position in a political party
Interview 6	M	Over 61	Member of the Parliament with extensive leadership experience in political organizations since 1989
Interview 7	M	21–40	Chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament
Interview 8	M	41–60	Ambassador, former minister, and member of the Parliament
Interview 9	F	21–40	Chair of the Standing Committee of the Parliament and former minister