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Sarah PAGUNG
Stanislav GHILETCHI

Moldova's Europeanization and interethnic cohesion - a delicate balancing act

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The pro-European parties in Moldova enjoy only minimal support (2%-6%) from Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauzians or Bulgarian ethnic groups. On the other hand, support for pro-Russian parties among these ethnic groups ranges from 54% to 74%. The result is that Moldovan society is increasingly polarized along ethnic lines. This is one of the main obstacles for the country's further development. Ethnic polarization further increases the vulnerability of Moldova's young democracy, which already suffers from growing concentration of power and rapidly eroding trust in government. In the face of this reality, political actors offer two diametrically opposed geopolitical responses: either to solidify Moldova's European integration or to cancel the Association Agreement with the EU and push the country into the Eurasian Economic Union.

The general parliamentary elections in February 2019 are expected to be a battle of "us versus them" rather than a competition over which policies would best develop the country and rebuild trust with Moldovan citizens after years of unfulfilled promises.

The worry and unease regarding polarization occurs when divergences become aligned within camps with mutually exclusive identities and preferences. Pro-Russian views are expressed not only by Russian ethnics but also by Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Gagauzians. This alignment along single dimension has created destabilizing political swings over the past of 27 years of Moldova's independence. The people of Moldova have suffered enough from division and polarisation. If politicians are unwilling or unable to compromise in order to bring the country together, the political divide will gradually grow to the point where it may be too late to do much about it.



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The biggest challenge for the European integration narrative in Moldova is, in fact, that the EU has become part of the societal rift. It is time for the political establishment to realize the dangers of their public discourse. It is one thing to have disagreements regarding EU integration. It is another to exploit them in order to feed grievances and exacerbate tensions between different ethnic groups. The division of society along a single dimension such as ethnicity/language is a worrying development that can lead to tensions and endanger the peaceful coexistence of different groups.

Geopolitical divisions over East versus West will continue to provoke heated debate. But whatever their narrow geopolitical interests, Moldovan political actors should focus on the shared priority of improving the lives of Moldovan citizens. While differences about policies are an inherent part of any democratic society, the exploitation of grievances between different ethnic groups is not. The goal of the debate is not to have everyone agree on a specific issue, but to foster national consensus. The debate about the future of the country should not be between the majority ethnic group and the national minority, but rather among citizens of the Republic of Moldova. People in Moldova want to live in peace with one another and, generally, they do. But some of them are worried about the impact of Europeanization on the activities that make up their daily lives, from growing fruits and vegetables and selling them on the market to receiving education in their native language to having their culture and values respected. Identity wars do not bring added value and should have no place in the Moldovan society. Dialogue and engagement, on the other hand, have a transformational potential.

The Association Agreement with the EU offers the possibility for modernization of the entire society. It is the roadmap towards democratization and development of Moldova. And rather than focusing on which union to join, the ruling elites

should enact policies that will increase the integrity of the judiciary, restore public trust in state institutions, improve the efficiency of healthcare, bring innovation into the classroom, and rebuild and expand roads and bridges.

The norms of public discourse employed by politicians must be rewritten and the futile practice of parties focusing on geopolitics rather than programs and policies of modernization must be abandoned. It is hard work. It will not be easy. But the effort is worth the great prize: saving democracy in Moldova.



I. INTRODUCTION

Increased polarisation of Moldovan society is one of the main obstacles for development. It further increases the vulnerability of our young democracy that already suffers from a growing concentration of power and a significant erosion of trust in Government. Both political actors and political parties exploit these divisions in society not only in order to mobilize political participation, but also for the sake of simplicity: they reduce voters' political choices, e.g. to a choice between the European Union (EU) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). This approach reduces the need for a comprehensive debate regarding the crucial problems that Moldova faces.

This highly polarized environment affects the way in which citizens reach political decisions, as leaders find it easier to influence the beliefs and opinions of citizens who have become less interested in facts and truthful information and more absorbed by partisan politics. Hence more and more differences in the society align along a single dimension, which contributes to an “us versus them” mind set. This mind set, in turn, decreases citizens' acceptance of and interest in different points of view. The continuously shrinking space for various political and civic ideas is a significant obstacle on our road to building a healthy and functional democracy.

Severe polarization threatens both governability and social cohesion because actions that lead to compromises and dialogue between various groups are punished by voters on opposite sides of the divide. The increased political cost of such compromises reduces the likelihood of their being reached, and further increases the obstacles to inter-group cooperation. Most debated issues have two diametrically opposed responses, with no options and solutions in between. But the possibility of compromise, of building bridges and reaching a consensus, represents an essential ingredient for managing

competing interests in a society in a harmonious and peaceful way.

Moldovan society has long been divided along ethnic or linguistic lines and on issues of foreign policy cleavages. But nonetheless, compared to the former Yugoslavia—which disintegrated rather fast and experienced high levels of violence and hatred—Moldova, so far, has benefited from tolerant interethnic relations. On the other hand, this harmonious coexistence must not be taken for granted, as ethnically diverse societies tend to have a higher probability of ethnic conflict and an increased level of political instability. With parliamentary elections scheduled for February 2019, the ground is fertile for a polarizing campaign season. In order to increase turn out, mobilize their voters, and appeal to loyal supporters, political leaders will adopt extreme positions, pitting ethnic groups against each other. The ideological distance between parties is growing each election cycle and, as a result, newly elected politicians inherit a country that is more divided and polarized.

SUPPORT FOR PRO-EUROPEAN VS PRO RUSSIAN PARTIES

There has been no any full-scale poll of ethnic voters during the past few election cycles. The best information available can be found in regular opinion polls. The Institute of Public Policies (IPP) opinion poll from November 2017 shows that 65% of citizens who identify as Russians would vote for the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, the leading pro-Russian party. 54% of Ukrainians and 50% of other ethnic groups would also support them.

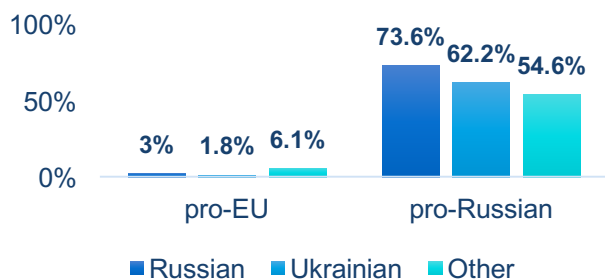
When all nine major parties included in the opinion poll are grouped according to their stance on foreign policy and security, the support for the pro-European parties from the ethnic groups is very little - a mere 2% to 6%. Meanwhile, for pro-Russian parties, support ranges from 54% to a



74%. These numbers underline the deep division that exists among Moldovan citizens along ethnic lines.

Figure 1.

Support for pro-EU vs pro-Russian political parties



Source: Author calculations based on IPP opinion poll¹

II. INTERETHNIC DIVISION - THE URGENCY TO ACT NOW

Interethnic division in the Republic of Moldova is capturing the attention of policymakers, representatives of civil society and academia, as more and more studies and papers are considering this issue. Some see interethnic division as one of the main obstacles for the development of the country². Others point out that there is no consensus about how to consolidate Moldovan society, although policymakers acknowledge the fact that interethnic tensions do represent a major problem for the country³. The bottom line is that the citizens of the Republic of Moldova have grown further apart and the potential for finding common solutions and compromises on crucial problems that face Moldova has significantly diminished.

Scholars and researchers emphasize that any healthy democracy requires a certain level of polarization, as this serves as a stimulus for heated but constructive policy debates. As problems become more complex and policy implications of elections harder to understand, polarization simplifies the choice for voters by grouping

politicians in straightforward boxes. It also allows for better mobilization and increased citizen's participation in democratic processes. This aspect is of particular interest, as voter turnout has registered a declining trend across the globe since the beginning of 1990s. Thus some level of polarization is needed in order to keep citizens engaged in governmental affairs.

But when a country splits into opposing camps with mutually exclusive identities and preferences, as in Moldova, it is an indication that polarization has reached an especially troubling level. It is not unusual for ethnic groups to have multiple identities within communities. But political entrepreneurs manage to exploit a particular cleavage, transforming into a dominant one along which other issues must align. Pro-Russian views are expressed not only by Russian ethnics, but also by Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Gagauzians.

There are historical and cultural reasons for this, including different media and educational institutions. Nonetheless it is extraordinary to observe how different ethnic groups have developed into being almost identical with Russian speaking population. Any differences that might have existed within the group have been concealed. The alignment on ethnicity shifts the debate, changing what should be a discussion about political, social and economic development into mutual resentments, paired with divisive rhetoric of "us versus them". The urgency of taking action is further emphasized by the fact that polarization becomes harder to reverse with the passage of time. Somer's⁴ analysis of ethnic polarization described how certain views initially expressed only at the individual level eventually succeed at becoming an integral part of society in general. Once the balance has tipped, people who were previously indecisive about or opposed to behaviour do not hesitate to jump on the bandwagon. When ethnic polarization reaches a



critical level in society, the snowball effect can generate various undesirable scenarios.

The failure to generate a powerful binding narrative means that other competing narratives will be created instead.

POLARIZATION IN MOLDOVA IS LARGELY DRIVEN BY THE POLITICAL ELITE

The absence of significant tensions between Moldovans/Romanians and other ethnic groups may signal that, at the level of people-to-people contact, ethnic identity does not play a major role. But things are completely different when it comes to public discourse. In the public arena, Moldova's Europeanization process is an effective tool to ensure political mobilization.

In the latest opinion poll done by the IPP in May 2018, Moldovans/Romanians support European Integration, with more than 62% declaring support for Moldova joining the EU, while other ethnic groups argue against the EU path, by 55% to 76% depending on ethnicity⁵.

These numbers closely track the support by other ethnic groups for political parties that openly oppose a European path for Moldova (figure 1). Thus politics becomes a competition of who can be the strongest supporter of European Union and the strongest opponent of Eurasian Economic Union/Russia, and vice versa. In a recent research conducted within EU Neighbours east project, authors concluded that the level of trust in the EU is highly correlated to a citizen's mother tongue. The survey found that Romanian speakers are more likely to trust the European Union than are Russian speakers (74% versus 31%)⁶.

The examples paint the conflict among groups in black and white, good and evil terms. The major danger of such simplifications is the fact that voters choose candidates they normally would not. As these are highly contested and salient issues, large

numbers of citizens vote against a candidate with the "wrong" geopolitical opinion rather than for a candidate whose policies they like.

Table 1. Examples of recent policies

- In February 2018⁷, a new law took effect that outlawed the retransmission of radio and TV programs from countries that have not ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. This effectively bans the retransmission of Russian radio and TV programs, as Russia is one of the few countries that has not ratified⁸ the Convention.
- Moldova's President, Igor Dodon, has promised to pull Moldova out of the Association Agreement and scrap the trade agreement with the European Union⁹ if his party wins the parliamentary elections. On the other hand, the Democratic Party, the senior partner of the governing coalition, has introduced a bill that would define European Integration as a goal within the Constitution¹⁰.
- In 2017, the Prime Minister in his speech¹¹ at the 72nd session of UN General Assembly mentioned the importance of adopting a UN resolution that would ask for withdrawal of Russian military forces from Moldovan territory. On June 22nd the UN General Assembly, with 64 votes for, adopted the resolution titled: *Complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova*. Moldova's President vehemently condemned the adoption of the resolution¹² presenting it as a serious blow to an already fragile and tense relationship with the Russian Federation.
- Moldova's Parliament in February 2018 adopted a declaration condemning alleged Russian attacks on cybersecurity and accusing Moscow's secret services of financing Moldovan political parties. Lawmakers from the Party of the Socialists protested the declaration and walked out of the session, with Moldova's president calling it "the most impulsive anti-Russian message"¹³ of the past 25 years.

The public discourse demonizes the geopolitical enemy, as it is easier to blame someone rather than



something for a particular failure. And as polarization continues to run deeper, the main rhetoric builds itself around pro- and anti- attitudes, such as the strong pro-EU and anti-EU dynamics observed in the last several election cycles, with a pronounced alignment along a single dimension of ethnicity. This approach has created destabilizing political swings over the past 27 years of Moldova's independence.

MOLDOVA'S ETHNIC DIVIDE SHOULD BE BRIDGED RATHER THAN EXPLOITED

A proper strategy aimed at strengthening cohesion and interethnic relations has never been implemented in Moldova. In 2016, after a lengthy process of drafting, consultations, and negotiations, the Moldovan government approved the National Strategy on Strengthening Interethnic Relations in Moldova for 2017-2027. The strategy seeks to correct the main drawback of former policies, which tried to integrate them with us. It is too early to talk about tangible results, but the change in approach is welcome, because **when integration is not about everybody, it is not integration**. The government should harness this positive momentum and expand its efforts to present interethnic relations as an important issue for the entire country, not one that affects only certain ethnic groups. Muddling through will not be enough if Moldova wants to become a country of shared belonging and equal opportunity.

The fact that Moldovan is implementing the Association Agreement should not exacerbate the identity-based divide in society. Rather, it must generate dialogue and debate on the country's political, social, and economic development of and how this should benefit all ethnic groups. Choosing one side of Moldova's growing ethnic divide can bring short-term results, but in the future this gamble will prove to be a losing strategy for everyone: politicians, citizens, civil society and the country itself. A house divided

cannot stand. On the other hand, a government's legitimacy is strengthened when political forces that form the government manage to go beyond identity politics, securing votes from every part of the society and thus bringing people together.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

To strengthen interethnic relations, the government should not be afraid to propose rather sensitive policies, even though they will inevitably raise difficult issues that some would prefer to ignore. But only by acknowledging the problem, rather than ignoring it, can Moldova identify and formulate solutions to reduce the drift into ethnic division. No serious debate is taking place at the governmental level regarding improving ethnic group representation within the public service or increasing Romanian language learning within various ethnic groups. The Romanian language should acquire the status of a shared language among all citizens, as mastering it is the only way to attain full economic, social and democratic participation in society. More governmental resources are needed to promote the language and to fund courses for ethnic groups that want to learn Romanian. In designing a successful interethnic strategy, ingredients such as equality of opportunity and equity are as important as identity.

People in Moldova, as elsewhere, are worried about jobs, economic growth, housing or health policies. The national objective of strengthening interethnic relations should acquire a more distinct local component, because better relations must happen in our schools and universities, in our markets and squares, in our neighbourhoods and communities. Facts and figures alone about the benefits of implementing the Association Agreement (AA) are not effective for changing beliefs and attitudes. Even if statistics show that the AA is good for the Moldovan economy, ethnic minorities believe that it is working for other groups but obviously not for them. Thus building local ownership and expanding interethnic dialogue at



the local level will be crucial for improving social cohesion.

Political actors must change the way they talk about the European integration process. It is detrimental to present the EU in the role of a panacea or bogeyman every time elections come. Instead of writing off entire categories of voters, politicians must engage with and understand those who are anxious or uneasy regarding Moldova's Europeanization. Public debate and public agenda is concentrated on geopolitics, with less and less talk dedicated to process of building a fair society and how European values and respect for rule of law can help Moldova on the path to building a country where everyone can prosper. In order to convince and win over sceptical ethnic groups, the norms of public discourse employed by politicians must be rewritten, and the futile practice of parties focusing on geopolitics rather than programs and policies of modernization must be changed.

The business sector could also play a more encouraging and a more catalysing role in terms of strengthening interethnic relations in the framework of Moldova's association with the EU. In 2017, 65%¹⁴ of all exports went to the EU. The share of exports to the EU has been on an increasing trend for the last years. The latest data suggests that 2018 will be the first year when exports to the EU will exceed 70%¹⁵.

But the silence of the business sector in relation to worsening ethnic polarization of Moldova is an enigma: it is rather difficult to find logical reasons why businesses that benefit directly from EU market access are not championing, encouraging, and promoting a stronger Europeanization message. Business can play a useful role in the debate by speaking directly to the public from its perspective and expertise. This does not mean telling citizens what they should do or believe, but rather informing them about the positive impact that direct access to the EU market has on sales, exports, revenues, and thus jobs.

As voters increasingly tied to parties by their ethnicity, it is difficult to hold a proper debate on political, social, and economic development perspectives in the framework of Moldova's AA with the EU. If the actual ruling class wants to ensure that Moldova's progress towards EU accession is irreversible, then they must take action to win the support of sceptics from various ethnic groups—not to activate cleavages that further split the country in two.

III. THE EU'S SUPPORTING ROLE IN OVERCOMING THE POLITICIZATION OF IDENTITIES

The EU has a long tradition of formulating and implementing cohesion policies in its member-states. In fact, the cohesion policy funds of 351.8bn € make up one third of total EU funds in the period between 2014 and 2020¹⁶.

The European Social fund, one of three instruments of European cohesion policy, is explicitly dedicated to furthering social integration and fighting discrimination. The EU not only seeks to strengthen policy fields like education, employment or environment, but also to foster European solidarity and help disadvantaged regions catch up. These policy instruments are viewed as an essential measure to support understanding between European ethnic groups and nationalities, as well as to create support for the European project itself and to help build a European identity. Nevertheless, various studies have shown that the correlation between cohesion projects, mutual understanding among ethnic and national groups, and the creation of a European identity is complex—and that the objectives of the EU in cohesion policy are not easy to achieve. Despite support of EU cohesion funds for structurally weak areas, support for the EU is still higher in wealthier regions that receive less financial support¹⁷. Local projects across borders and/or including different ethnic and national groups often create a more positive picture of the



other group. But this impact is often limited to personal contacts and does not necessarily transfer to a broader political context. Studies also show that the awareness of being a direct beneficiary of EU policy translates much more into a positive view of the EU than does the bare knowledge of EU policies and measures¹⁸.

THE EU FAVOURS AN INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH TO MINORITY POLICIES

While the EU takes strong responsibility for cohesion policy, it lacks responsibilities in minority protection and anti-discrimination policy. Whereas minority protection is one of the Copenhagen Criteria for accession candidates, the EU hands over responsibility for this policy field to member states once they join the EU. Nevertheless, the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 includes “respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.”¹⁹

Additionally, the Racial Equality Directive, the Equal Treatment Directive and the Citizens Right Directive of the EU are directed against any discrimination, though they focus more on nationality conflicts than on the rights of ethnic minorities²⁰. This reflects the EU’s typical approach towards minority protection, whereby the issue is mostly seen through the lens of non-discrimination. **This individualized approach is also visible in the EU’s policy towards its Eastern neighbours. The Association Agreement with the Republic of Moldova commits Moldova to “strengthening respect for [...] rights of persons belonging to minorities.”**²¹ In sum, because the EU member states are the bodies responsible for minority protection, the EU as a whole is working with a patchwork of regulations reflecting political culture and history of its member states.

The influence of ethnicity on nationality politics is hard to assess, as **there is no common definition of ethnic minorities, especially in contrast to**

groups for instance defined by race or language. Nevertheless, it is clear that these factors have drastically different influences in different EU member states. Belgian policy is massively influenced by the polarization between the Flemish and Wallonia part of the country, just as Spanish domestic policy is marked by the impact of its regional party from Catalonia. In France, by contrast, there is no strong role for any minority party or politics. Federalization and granting of autonomy as a tool to manage diversity and grant rights to (ethnic) minorities is also used to a varying degree across the EU.

BUILDING AN EUROPEAN IDENTITY

When discussing the countries of the Eastern Partnership, scholars and politicians often refer to the Central Eastern European member states accessing the EU after the end of the Cold War. These states with post-socialist or post-soviet legacies underwent a comprehensive transformation of their politics, economy, and society. Today’s approach towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership is based on the integration process of these states. However, it does not foresee offering these states accession to the EU in the foreseeable future—the offer is, as Romano Prodi, former president of the European Commission, put it: “all except for institution.”²²

Central Eastern European states, just as the countries of the Common Neighbourhood, have been shaped by a complex history regarding their identity, language, and territory. Nevertheless, Central European states enjoyed a rather stable identity based on a national majority and a completed process of state building. This included a strong will for European integration. Ethnic (or non-ethnic) minorities did not seek to hinder the creation of these states centred around a national majority group. The main challenge for these states after the fall of the Iron Curtain therefore consisted of transitioning their system, aligning to the



Copenhagen Criteria, and building a European identity.

The latter is by far the most complicated and longstanding challenge, not only for the new member states. Creating a common European identity has been a priority of the EU since the 1970s. **A common feeling of belonging is seen as crucial for creating coherence, enabling solidarity among EU member states and citizens, and building acceptance and legitimacy for the Union and its policies itself. It is therefore seen as one pillar of European stability, especially in times of crisis.** A political identity generally consists of three aspects: an objective legal-institutional and/or social framework, a subjective attachment to a certain group, and a fitting interpretation of the political community itself.²³ Hence, it is not clear what a European identity refers to: a Judeo-Christian tradition, the enlightenment and humanism, the European integration process, or a Europe of Nations. While some of these are combinable, others are mutually exclusive. The antagonism between the leitmotifs of the European integration process and a Europe of nations lies at the heart of the current populist challenge inside the Union itself and the question of the ultimate goal of the European project. The EU's efforts to build a European identity are based on the findings of creating identities in nation states: The EU refers to common values, history and symbols. In contrast to identities in nation states, the EU emphasizes its diversity and prioritises the demos over ethnos to bridge the numerous ethnic and cultural groups living in the Union. Still, researchers and political practitioners disagree about whether a European identity is a condition for or a product of a successful integration project.

In a 2012 review of its own policies the EU Commission found two models for the formation of European identity: first, a culturalist top-down approach based on European values and their manifestation in practices and policies; and

second, a structuralist bottom-up approach based on personal association and interaction of European individuals.²⁴ This reflects the fact that identity creation can be supported but not forced by institutions. The Eurobarometer 2018 revealed that, for the first time since 2010, more than half of the EU's population consider themselves citizens of Europe.²⁵ However, national and regional/local identities are still much stronger. Given the decade-long efforts of the EU and massive investments in cohesion policy, these are mixed results

MOLDOVA FACES A THREEFOLD CHALLENGE

In contrast to the Central Eastern European states, Moldova cannot build upon an existing national identity while pursuing a path of European rapprochement, let alone while creating an European identity. **The Republic of Moldova faces three major challenges: state-building, forming a common identity, and finding its foreign policy course.** The latter two are indeed interconnected. The choice of integration with the EU or with the Eurasian Economic Union gets at the very heart of the debate about what Moldova is: Does it belong to Europe or to the Eurasian space?

A national identity is not only a connecting element between a citizen and its society, but also between a society and the world.²⁶ As the Moldovan identity is still contested, politicians use antagonizing identities to mobilize their respective electorates and win new voters. As argued in the previous chapter, foreign policy orientation has become one of the shaping factors of Moldovan politics, serving as a tool for mobilization and therefore deepening existing rifts in the Moldovan society.

According to polls, a divide between Russian and Romanian speakers seems to be shaping Moldovan society, as does a rift between generations and education levels. Russian speakers, as well as elderly people aged over 55 years and citizens with lower education, are more critical in their views of the European Union.²⁷ By



creating the Eastern Partnership in 2009, the EU wanted to pull its Eastern neighbours closer and build a “ring of friends” to foster its very own security and stability. Therefore, the EU strongly supported the so-called pro-European governments that have ruled Moldova since 2009. Among the Eastern Partnership countries, Moldova was for a long period perceived as a frontrunner due to its commitment to European integration. This perception since fell apart in the EU, at the latest since the “fraud of the century”, the massive 2015 corruption scandal. The EU has even frequently frozen financial aid to the Republic of Moldova because of violations of the rule of law or corruption cases. The latest example of this came in June 2018, when the results of early mayoral elections in the capital of the Republic of Moldova were annulled after Andrei Nastase, the candidate supported by the anti-oligarch and extra-parliamentary opposition forces, came away victorious.

Yet the EU still cooperates on an institutional level with the Moldovan government, especially since the competition of integration models with Russia increased after the annexation of Crimea. The EU frequently faces accusations from European scientists and experts that it tolerates both corruption and the insufficient implementation of reforms required by the common Association Agreement. Additionally, a comprehensive monitoring of reforms, especially in the juridical sphere, is often complicated. The creation of the National Anticorruption Center (NAC) and the National Integrity Commission (NIC) is a vivid example. With their creation, the Moldovan government wanted to meet key criteria of the Association Agreement regarding prosecution of corruption and transparency and objectivity in public sector institutions. But “decision makers created them weak, granted them unclear powers and underfunded them”, so they cannot fulfil their duties.²⁸

THE EU LACKS A COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY CONCEPT

Even though 79% of Moldovan citizens are aware of financial support of the EU for the Republic of Moldova, the EU faces an information deficit. Only 37% assess this aid as effective or very effective, while 58% evaluate the support as not very effective or not effective at all. **The knowledge of European financial support is further connected to the education and mother tongue of respondents**, with highly educated and Moldovan/Romanian speaking citizens having a better knowledge of European support. This shows the shortcomings in European public diplomacy towards Moldovan citizens, especially those communicating mostly in Russian or other minority languages.²⁹ This rift is deepened by Russian or Russian-language news outlets, which partly spreading disinformation in Europe, for example by falsely claiming that NATO-accession is a precondition for EU-integration. This negative perception is strengthened by the belief that EU integration will lead to a rise in living costs and economic decline because Moldovan business is not capable of competing with European companies.³⁰

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Geopolitical divisions over East versus West will continue to provoke heated debates. But the debate should focus on the shared priority of improving the lives of Moldovan citizens rather than on narrow geopolitical interests. Differences about policies are an inherent part of any democratic society, but exploitation of grievances between different ethnic groups is not. The goal of the debate is not to have everyone agree on a specific issue, but to foster national consensus. The debate about the future of the country should not be between the majority ethnic group and the national minority, but among citizens of the Republic of Moldova. People in Moldova



want to live in peace with one another and on the whole they do. But some of them are worried about the impact of Europeanization on the activities that make up their daily lives, from growing fruits and vegetables and selling them on the market to receiving education in their native language to having their culture and values respected. Identity wars do not bring added value and should have no place in the Moldovan society. However, dialogue and engagement have a transformational potential.

The biggest challenge for European integration narrative in Moldova is in fact, that it has become part of the societal rift. It is clearly associated with a conflict drawn in black and white and not with its values or a comprehensive concept of political, social and economic development.

Moldova's Europeanization should not contribute to division along ethnic lines but must be used as an opportunity to transform it into a catalyst to close that gap. Europeanization has achieved this in many European countries, first and foremost because it is a tool of transformation based on values of democracy and human rights. Rhetoric alone cannot make Moldova's path towards Europe irreversible, nor can pitting ethnic groups against each other. Only by convincing Moldovan citizens from all ethnic groups can this be achieved. It is time for politicians to debate and offer solutions that will increase citizens' trust in the country's future, irrespective of their ethnic origin or language they speak. If they don't, Moldovans will continue to be divided and society will become lastingly polarized. The country will be forced to pay this high price because the political establishment failed "in its most basic functions of protecting the lives of citizens or preventing the pilfering of public money."³¹ And recent developments represent warning signs for democratic norms and governance.

The Association Agreement with the EU offers the possibility for modernization of the entire society. It is the roadmap towards democratization

and development of Moldova. And rather than focusing on which union to join, the ruling elites should enact policies that will: increase the integrity of judiciary, restore public trust in state institutions, improve the efficiency of healthcare, innovate the classrooms, or rebuild and expand roads and bridges.

The norms of public discourse employed by politicians must be rewritten and the futile practice of parties focusing on geopolitics rather than programs and policies of modernization must change. It is hard work. But the prize is well worth the effort, as this will save the democracy in Moldova.

Recommendations for the Moldovan Government:

- To step up its efforts in developing new programmes aimed at increasing interethnic relations and social cohesion: (i) promotion and increasing of Romanian language learning; (ii) improving representation of various ethnic groups in local and central governments; (iii) raising employment opportunities in public and private sector;
- To allocate more financial resources to implement the Strategy on Strengthening Interethnic Relations. Without adequate financial support, it will be impossible to put into practice the ambitious goals of the strategy;
- To appoint an advisor to the Prime Minister responsible for overseeing the interethnic policies implemented at the national level. Also, for cities with a higher share of ethnic groups, to appoint a deputy mayor for interethnic relations to ensure local ownership of national policies.
- To improve cooperation with local public authorities and support local projects as well. Even the timid actions taken at the national level have not been replicated or matched at the local level. Better relations must happen in our schools and universities, in our markets and squares, in our neighbourhoods and communities.



- To identify ways to involve the business sector in more informational campaigns, especially in order to target those ethnic groups that have the lowest levels of trust towards EU. The government should encourage businesses to think innovatively about the contribution that they can make concerning this particular issue. Business can play a useful role in the debate by speaking directly to the public from its perspective and expertise. This does not mean telling citizens what they should do or believe, but rather informing them about the positive impact of direct access to the EU market on sales, exports, revenues, and thus jobs.

Recommendations for the EU:

At the moment the EU is often seen as Russia's rival and competitor in the struggle to pull Moldova into the orbit of a larger bloc. But to bridge political rifts in politics and society it needs to be seen as an actor offering a sustainable path for political, societal, and economic development for the Moldovan society. Changing this perception should be the long-term goal of policy, especially as the European policy towards Moldova is not as dependent on electoral cycles as national policies in Moldova. A broader reform of the Eastern Partnership concept is needed to pursue this goal. Besides this, the EU has leverage on Moldovan politics that it can unfold in short-term actions.

- Some of the insights gained by supporting the creation of a European identity in the EU can be applied in Moldova. Eastern European EU member states have an often fragmented cultural and ethnical structure that is not always congruent to state borders. The EU was widely seen as a mediator in solving conflicts and finding compromises. The EU should do so in its own policy towards Moldova and also encourage the Moldovan government. While cross border projects on a national level in civil society as well as public affairs are no silver bullet, they promote understanding and dissolve resentments. The EU and the Moldovan government should expand

support for these projects. (iii) The EU appreciates minority cultures and languages as a resource and promotes them, either in majority society or to other groups. Respecting diversity, in the way the EU promotes it, could be an example for Moldova.

- The EU needs to improve its public diplomacy efforts towards the citizens of Moldova. To do so it should focus on (i) information in the mother tongue of ethnic minorities, as their knowledge of the Romanian language is often limited, especially among Gagauz. As studies in the EU on cohesion have shown, receiving personal benefits from EU support funds does more to create a positive view of the EU than does the mere knowledge of their existence. Therefore, the EU should (ii) label projects financed by their funds more clearly. Furthermore, the EU should (iii) promote its funds in the languages of the minorities to receive increased applications from these groups. If the EU had better contacts with the representational bodies of the minorities, this would be even easier. Having the option of applying for EU funds in minority languages would improve minorities' chances to profit from EU funds and develop a more positive picture of the EU, especially for the Gagauz and Bulgarian minorities.
- The EU should not bind itself to a certain party but rather to its values like democracy or the rule of law. The EU is often accused of supporting any pro-European government, no matter how little progress it makes in implementing reforms or corrupt it is. It should support political movements or parties that incorporate those values most credibly and also engage in dialogue with those not favouring European integration. This explicitly includes withdrawing (financial) support if Moldova does not comply with common agreements or tries to circumvent these, even though this might lead to a temporary backlash in Moldova against European integration or be perceived as a win for Russia. But the non-compliance to common criteria not only damages the image of the EU within Moldova but also hinders the economic and political development of the country.



- The EU should refrain from an “either or” rhetoric as well as from using images of rivalry if it wants to avoid deepening the societal divide over foreign policy orientation. It should focus on questions of internal political, social, and economic development. In light of disinformation spread by

Russian or Russian-speaking news outlets, it is even more important that the EU focus on credible but easy-to-understand information tailored to the Moldovan target groups.



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