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THE EUROPEAN DREAM: MOLDOVA'S WAY INTO THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Introduction

The war in Ukraine triggered a historic change on the EU's eastern border and the EU's calculus about the costs and benefits of admitting new members among its midst. Apart from Ukraine, the most hopeful EU aspirant is the Republic of Moldova. Albeit being a small country with seemingly limited power to affect global politics, Moldova's accession is of geopolitical importance to the EU. The summit of the European Political Community, held in the Moldovan capital in June 2023, accentuated this and aimed at sending a clear message to Russia: Moldova is part of the European family. Moreover, the European Commission recently issued a strong recommendation to open EU accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova, which was echoed by the European Council during its meeting on December 15. The following analysis explores the challenges that Moldova has to face in order to become an official member of the Union and provides possible approaches on how to overcome them.

1. The Geopolitical Importance of Moldova

It has been more than 30 years since Russia launched its first hybrid war against Moldova, triggering the frozen conflict of Transnistria. The 4,000 square kilometer region in the eastern part of the Moldovan Republic has an unclear status since then and poses real military threat for Moldova to this day. The fear of a Russian invasion is still great, especially since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Not only does Moldova share a 1,222 km border with Ukraine and welcomed over 100,000 war refugees, but also due to the proximity of the war, no other neighboring country is experiencing the war as closely as the Republic of Moldova. The bombing of Odessa, which is just a two-hour drive away, can be heard in the Moldovan capital Chisinau. Only Ukraine's military success in fighting back the invaders saved the country from a similar fate in early 2022.

Moldova's biggest security threat is the so-called 14th Russian Army, stationed in Transnistria, a legacy of the 1992 conflict: the approximately 3,000-strong unit is not only tasked with "keeping the peace", but also with guarding a 20,000-tonne weapons cache from the times of the Soviet Union. Thousands of reservists can be mobilized at any time. A highly explosive situation for the Moldovan government, which feared that if Odessa falls, literally nothing stands in the way of Russian troops in Ukraine joining forces with the 14th Army. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and other officials threaten Moldova from time to time with "the fate of Ukraine", especially since the Moldovan president Maia Sandu faced criticism from Russia for her pro-European and transatlantic stand and her demands for a withdrawal of the illegal "peacekeeping troops" from Transnistria and openly calling Russia an "aggressor state".

Against this background, Moldova's sudden and urgent application for EU membership in April 2022 seems like a cry for help to the EU member states to protect Moldova from a Russian attack. Ukraine closed its borders to Transnistria, but still fears an attack from this side and keeps around 20.000 militaries stationed there.

Moldova is therefore crucial for the Western alliance with regards to the Russian war against Ukraine, but also for containing Russian influence in the region.

2. Moldova's Complicated European Path

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the whole communist bloc disintegrated within two years. Moldova experienced a peaceful transition from a Soviet republic to a sovereign entity, gaining its independence on August 27, 1991. In the first years following the Declaration of Independence, the European family was hardly mentioned in the official statements of the Moldovan leaders. Mircea Snegur was the first president of Moldova to declare in 1993 that "Moldova as an independent state has a propensity to return to Europe (...) by establishing a rule of law state and a free market". European integration as a strategic foreign policy objective for Moldova was recognized for the first time in the official governing program of former Prime Minister Ion Sturza in 1999.

However, this development took a turn when the Communist Party regained power in the parliamentary elections in 2001. Communist president Vladimir Voronin, who governed until 2009, strengthened the country's economic and political ties with Russia during this time. A joint opposition force called the Alliance for European Integration wrested power from the Communists in 2009 and aimed at putting Moldova back on a pro-European path. However, massive corruption within this government not only led to the "theft of the century", in which a billion US dollars was laundered from the banking system, but also created an oligarchic multi-party system with strong links to Russia, while at the same time publicly promoting the country's European course. In fact, the state and the judiciary system was captured by oligarchs at that time. The most notorious and powerful of them was Vladimir Plahotniuc. After two years of protests and national elections in 2019, an unusual alliance between pro-European political protest forces and the pro-Russian Socialist Party led by Igor Dodon (president from 2016-2020) curbed the power of oligarchs. Oligarchs like Plahotniuc or Ilhan Shor fled abroad, from where they are still trying to influence the country until today – also as an extended arm of Moscow.

In 2020, Maia Sandu won the presidential elections against the former pro-Putin President Dodon and emerged as a pro-European leader. Her popularity ensured that her Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) won 63 seats in the 101-seat single-chamber parliament in 2021, following early parliamentary elections. For the first time, Moldova had a fully committed president, parliament and government to lead the country on a pro-European path at the same time.

In June 2023, Moldova hosted the historical summit of the European Political Community, convening nearly 50 leaders in Chisinau to deliberate on matters of peace, security, energy, and climate. On this occasion, the EU pledged its support for Moldova's efforts to join the European family. Earlier in the same year, a trilateral dialogue took place in Bucharest, Romania's capital, where Chancellor Olaf Scholz engaged in discussions with Romania's President Klaus Iohannis and Moldova's President Maia Sandu. The agenda of these talks encompassed Moldova's integration, the challenges posed by hybrid threats in the context of the ongoing war against Ukraine and security challenges in the Black Sea region.

The Republic of Moldova received the EU candidate status in June 2022 along with Ukraine, shortly after the outbreak of war. In November this year, the EU Commission recommended starting accession negotiations with Moldova. The decision was confirmed at the European Council summit on December 15, which required the unanimous blessing of all 27-member states. History will certainly remember Hungarian President Viktor Orban's infamous coffee break in order not to jeopardize the vote. In a bargain attempt to solve his domestic issues with the Commission, Orban publicly opposed the opening of accession talks with both

countries and blocked instead the EU's €50 billion financial assistance to Ukraine.

Despite several reform endeavours to meet the requirement of starting the negotiations, challenges to Moldova's EU aspirations remain high. There are in particular five areas, which need to be addressed to fulfil Moldova's desire to be a part of the EU family.

3. Sensitive Issues to Moldova's EU Aspirations

3.1 The Rule of Law

One major obstacle to Moldova's EU accession has been deficits in the area of rule of law. In 2014, Moldova was shaken by the national scandal called „the theft of the century”, the largest money laundering scheme, in which \$1bn (equivalent to 12% of Moldova's GDP at that time) was stolen by organized crime and have not been recovered.

Since 2020, the anticorruption policies are top priority for the Moldovan government and a matter of concern for ordinary citizens and the NGO sector. In 2019, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom supported the publication “[The Black Book](#)”, a comprehensive investigative report on how public money is spent in Moldova. The EU and Romania in particular have been actively involved in several programs aimed at improving justice policies and fighting corruption. Seven of the fourteen high level advisors sent by the EU to support the Moldovan government in its rule of law reforms are Romanians covering key fields such as justice reform, fiscal policies, or administration. After years of tensions between Romania and Moldova, which share largely a common language and history, Romania took a leading role in supporting and guiding its sister country through this process.

Also, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ](#) is running an anticorruption program funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), supporting governmental and civil society measures to prevent corruption and promoting the implementation of the National Integrity and Anti-corruption Strategy. This is done within the framework of EU convergence and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. A noteworthy model of good practices in this regard is the success of the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) in Romania. The former president of DNA, Codru a Kovesi, serves now as the Chief Prosecutor at the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO). With support of Romania, Moldova created a similar structure that has the potential to yield similar positive results as in Romania.

Apart from the anti-corruption measures, the country made good progress on electoral legislation, which has been comprehensively amended to address inconsistencies. However, there still remains a lot to be done to fully overcome certain deficits in the area of rule of law, like increasing the transparency of the parliament, stronger involvement of civil society in the decision-making process, reform of the public administration, efficiency of the judicial system, the fight against organized crime and prison conditions. One important key conditionality is the deoligarchisation of the country.

3.2 Minorities

Moldova is a multi-ethnic state, which is a result of historical factors and of the influence of communist policies that aimed to move large segments of the population to alter identities and blur cultural boundaries in the process. One might see this as a source of cultural

richness and enlightening, while others perceive it as a potential source of instability.

Moldova has two large minorities in Ukraine (the second-largest minority) and in secessionist Transnistria. Respectively, there is also a large minority of Ukrainians living in Moldova: 181.035 according to the 2014 census and additionally about 100,000 war refugees from Ukraine. Thus, one of the poorest countries in Europe with an official population of about 2.6 million - realistically estimated at 1.8 million, due to labour migration – hosts the largest number of refugees in Europe in relation to the number of its inhabitants. According to the mentioned census, other minorities represented with percentages of over 4% are the Gagauz and Russian minorities, [both favouring the Kremlin's policy](#) with approval ratings of over 90%.

While some measures to ensure fundamental rights for minorities are in place, there is no doubt that this remains one of the most challenging topics for Moldova's EU accession. Experiences from other EU member states can also be helpful. Romania managed to implement a good set of multicultural policies to address the needs of its minorities, including the representation of 17 official minorities in the Romanian Parliament (a recommendation by the European Commission in 2007). In addition, the increased dialogue with the host countries of the diaspora can also bear some fruits. Starting in September 2022, a new cooperation format was launched when the foreign affairs ministers of Ukraine, Romania and Moldova met in Odesa. This "first of its kind" trilateral dialogue holds the potential to open new opportunities for consensus in the context of the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession.

3.3 Frozen conflicts – the case of Transnistria

After a brief yet bloody secessionist war that unfolded from March to July 1992, resulting in a death toll of 700 lives, Transnistria became one of the "frozen conflicts" of the post-Soviet world, an enclave of 400,000 inhabitants situated between Moldova and Ukraine. The separatist regime in Transnistria has been artificially maintained for decades by Russia, which still maintains around 1,500 soldiers under the pretext of "peacekeeping" in the region.

After several failed attempts to solve the crisis in Transnistria (OSCE - 2002, the Kozak Memorandum - 2003, the so-called 5+2 Format - 2005), the war against Ukraine is considered as an opportunity to end this frozen conflict. The main reason for this shift is economical since the risk of national bankruptcy for Transnistria is high. The Russian occupation of Transnistria in 1992 is also a poignant reflection of the aggressive actions undertaken by the former Soviet Union along its borders.

The EU accession talks are expected to address the issue of Transnistria but it will most likely not dominate the talks. During the second meeting of the European Political Community in Chisinau, the High Representative, Vice-President Josep Borrell stated: „Moldova's path is independent of what is happening in Transnistria. Cyprus became a member of the European Union having a territorial problem. Moldova can do it.”

What is more, Moldova already has two strategies in place for the reintegration of this separatist strip. The first one was proposed by civil society, encompassing the "3Ds" (Demilitarization, Decriminalization and Democratization) and the other one being Law 137/2005 on the special status of local entities from Transnistria. A mix of the two plans might eventually serve as a basis for the further development of a compromise to resolve this issue.

3.4 Energy Dependency on Russia

Moldova's National Strategy (2023-2028) lists five major vulnerabilities that are on the government's agenda – the war in Ukraine, the 30% inflation rate, the refugees' situation, anticorruption efforts, and the energy crisis. Gas prices rose in 2023 by three hundred percent. Russian leaders use Gazprom, a state-owned company, to retaliate against the outspoken pro-European position of the current Moldovan government.

Only for a short period, Moldova imported around 80% of its electricity from the European spot market, but the prices are four times higher than the previous ones. At the moment, Moldova is dependent on the electricity from the power plant Cuciurgan, which is located in Transnistria and controlled through oligarchs by the Russian company Inter RAO.

The so-called Transnistrian state practically finances itself from producing electricity with Russian gas and selling it to Chisinau. Politicians in Chisinau are talking more and more openly about the fact that Transnistria would not be able to survive for more than three months without the revenue from Chisinau. On the other hand, Moldova also relies on the cheap electricity and banning the import would cause a humanitarian catastrophe in Transnistria, which would in the end overburden Moldova financially.

In September 2023, Gazprom reclaimed historic debts of 708 million euros from Moldova for energy supplies. A large sum for a state whose GDP is just 12.5 billion euros. However, the Moldovan state is only willing to recognize 8.6 million euros of this sum, according to Energy Minister Victor Parlikov, following the results of an international audit carried out on behalf of the ministry. 400 million of the claimed debt are considered time-barred, whereas 276 million is reclaimed without any proof and the rest is claimed as unpaid benefits. The Kremlin is thus emphasising how dependent and therefore vulnerable the Republic of Moldova is in this respect to Russia.

Romania offered to help Moldova out of its energy dependency by selling electricity at a discounted price, but the bills are difficult to cover both for the ordinary citizens and for the government.

In November 2022, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced a financial package amounting to Euro 250 million to aid Moldova in overcoming its energy crisis. One of the solutions envisioned in the National Strategy is the development of interconnection projects with other European countries. These projects aim to create a denser network of natural gas and electricity, which would ultimately reduce the dependency on Russian energy supplies.

These measures are leading the way to guarantee the Republic's full energy security, as a [policy paper](#) by FNF shows. In November, the Moldovan Energy Minister Victor Parlicov confirmed to German journalists that for the coming winter energy supply is assured by gas stored in Ukraine and Romania. In addition, the construction of the high voltage lines between to Romania is on its way and will reduce the dependency on the Transnistrian plant in the next years.

3.5 Russia's Destabilizing Influence and Its War against Ukraine

In May 2022, one viral tweet about Moldova conquered the world. Its message was: "A small country with a big heart". This title has resurfaced repeatedly in international media since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The central message conveyed was the generosity of the

Moldovan people who welcomed more than 841.000 Ukrainian refugees in their homes. A [short documentary](#) movie with the same title was released in February 2023 depicting the lives of Ukrainian refugees and Moldovan hosts (funded by USAID).

According to a recent report by the UN high Commissioner for Refugees, approximately 108.889 individuals are still living in Moldova, a country with a population of 2.6 million. The UN report highlights that 46.8% of refugees are children, 36.5% are women and 20% are over 60 years old.

As seen in other conflicts, President Putin is causing and weaponizing refugee crises to provoke instability and chaos. His interventions in Syria pushed 1.4 million refugees into the EU, aiming at exacerbating social crises in the host countries. The Kremlin seems to apply the same playbook now. The surge of refugees from Ukraine will undeniably pose a challenge to the Moldovan government and its society, even though the country's response has been exemplary. [According to the UNCHR](#), Moldova has assisted refugees with adequate shelter and supported various other needs of Ukrainian refugees, including protection services, health care, education and multipurpose cash.

Apart from the influx of refugees, Moldova is facing hybrid threats from actors linked to the Russian state. These threats encompass disinformation, propaganda, anti-Western propaganda, sabotage and plans to destabilize the institutions of Moldova. The Russian term for these tactics is [maskirovka](#), i.e. a military tactic of diversion used in times of peace and war. In February 2023, a protest backed by the Shor Party, a Russian ally in Moldova, called for the resignation of Maia Sandu and advocated against the involvement of the country in the war. The other pro-Russian party (the Socialists) operates rather under the radar, through social media and pro-Russian media outlets.

In order to curb the Russian influence, the Moldovan government introduced a range of measures. In late November, the government in Moldova blocked 31 websites for alleged pro-Russian propaganda and closed six TV stations, which were controlled by pro-Russian actors. In June 2023, the Constitutional Court declared the Shor party illegal, accused by the government of violating the rule of law and acting against the sovereignty of Moldova authorities. In November, the Moldovan authorities banned another pro-Russian party from taking part in local elections on the grounds that it endangers national security just two days before the local elections. Prime Minister Dorin Recean announced the ban on candidates from the Chance Party, which was created as an alternative to the Shor Party by the fugitive business magnate Ilan Shor, who was jailed in absentia earlier this year on fraud charges. [The ban](#) was imposed hours after Moldova's national security service accused Shor of helping funnel 1 billion lei (50 million euros) into the country to stage anti-government protests in connection to the war in Ukraine and to "buy" voters. As a result, the government party lost the elections not just in the capital Chisinau, but also in all major cities of the country.

It remains to be seen if any of these measures will bear some fruits. Next elections are the presidential ones at the end of next year when a reelection of Maia Sandu is expected, but not any more guaranteed.

4. Conclusion

The challenges to Moldova's accession are great, but so is the will of the people of Moldova and that of the EU to fully integrate the country amongst its midst. The second summit of the

European Political Community gathered nearly 50 heads of states and prime ministers in the capital of Moldova, Chisinau. This historical event took place in June 2023 and the message it conveyed was clear – the European countries form a united front to protect Moldova and Ukraine and support their progress toward European accession.

Earlier in May, an impressive rally of more than 75.000 persons took the streets of Chisinau to express the desire of Moldovan citizens to join the EU. This large support for EU membership gives reason to be optimistic – and the EU enthusiasm seems to be growing. While a nationwide [survey](#) conducted by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom in January 2023 showed that pro-European forces are losing electoral points due to rampant poverty and declining living standards, and only 48% of respondents wanted to join the EU while 34% stood with Russia, a survey conducted in October by [iData](#) shows that by now 60.6% of respondents are now in favour of Moldova's accession to the European Union, while 33.1% are against it. The rest are undecided. According to the Foundation's survey, the undecided segment of the population (18%) seemed to agree that Moldova's prosperity and democracy are possible only within the EU family. These results give reason for cautious optimism.

Nonetheless, a lot remains to be done before Moldova is an official member of the EU. The EU integration process of Moldova and Ukraine is announced to begin this year and is expected to conclude by 2030. The procedure of joining EU consists of six clusters and the EU and its member states should help Moldova in advancing these chapters. Establishing the rule of law and fighting corruption seem at this moment the most important ones and these issues have many bumps on the road. For Moldova, it is particularly important to guarantee energy security, and this can be done only by financing the connectors to the European energy network through Romania. Moldova will be part of EU's "roam like home" area from 2024, enabling visitors in Moldova and Moldovan citizens in the EU to use mobile phones under reasonable pricing conditions. It is imperative that the European community lends its support to the independent media outlets in Moldova and, equally important, to the pro-European NGO sector. A fragile democracy cannot function without the right to free press, the right to be informed, nor without organizations that monitor state authorities and fight off hostile influences.

Before Russia's war against Ukraine, few people could have imagined that the Commission would grant Moldova and Ukraine candidate status for membership of the European Union as early as June 2022. Though this process takes time, there is no doubt that both countries are fully committed to meeting the criteria imposed by EU as soon as possible. They have both demonstrated their will to belong to the West and the institutions it has created. After the war, renewed talks are expected to take place between NATO and Ukraine, potentially opening the door for a fast-track membership. Moldova must change its Constitution to join NATO, since it is currently a neutral country according to its fundamental law. While the polls are changing gradually, with only 22% of Moldovans expressing support for the accession to NATO in the most recent survey (November 2022), military experts are betting on a big shift soon. The EU and its Western allies would be well-advised to assist Moldova to meet the necessary accession criteria as soon as possible and integrate it in their security structures in their quest to build up a new security architecture for Europe instead of having Russia dictating it. At the same time, the government of Moldova must do anything in its power to modernize the country to make it fit for accession.

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About the project region

The Southeast and East Europe project region is organized by the Foundation's regional office in Sofia and has numerous project offices throughout the region – including Bucharest, Belgrade, Istanbul, Tbilisi, and Kyiv. In addition to the numerous activities in areas such as human rights or liberal democracy in the all project countries, the regional office in Bulgaria implements a number of initiatives and programs that have an overarching function for the region. For instance, the annual "Future of Freedom" consultation promotes political dialogue between partners, liberal opinion leaders and multipliers from politics and society.

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