

## EU ACCESSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: THE CHALLENGES OF THE INTERNAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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***Abstract.** The geopolitical context, but also by internal political changes have had a considerable impact on the dynamics and evolution of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. During the last two decades, the geopolitical reality has fundamentally changed in the area of Central and Eastern Europe. The accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to the European Union is a complex and highly topical issue that has come again to the forefront of discussions in Brussels and in the European chancelleries on the background of Russian aggression since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The objective of this analysis is to identify and view and discuss the challenges posed by the beginning of the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova from the perspective of a geopolitical contextualization and under the influence of internal identity cleavages, with an emphasis on the reality in Transnistrian region and Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (ATU Gagauzia). From a methodological point of view, in order to understand the internal and geopolitical contextualization, we consider a diachronic analytical approach, as well as an explanatory-descriptive one, following in particular the evolution of the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU after the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).*

***Keywords:** Republic of Moldova, geopolitical context, EU, Transnistrian region, ATU Gagauzia.*

### **Introduction and methodology**

The accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to the European Union is a complex and highly topical issue that has come again to the forefront of discussions in Brussels and in the European chancelleries on the background of Russian aggression since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The geopolitical challenges are very high and complicated by the internal context for both states. In particular, the Republic of Moldova is obliged to take into account, in addition to the aspirations of the majority of the population and the identity cleavages within society. The political connotations of this reality are considerable and have been impacted by the Russian interference and

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influence on some political parties, on a part of the Orthodox church in the Republic of Moldova, but also the direct or indirect control it has had over the last decades over a significant part of the media (press). The Republic of Moldova has clearly and categorically manifested its pro-European orientation by formulating the application for opening of accession negotiations with the European Union. It has received the status of candidate country alongside Ukraine, on June 25th 2024, the first intergovernmental conference in the accession negotiations was officially opened for both countries (The European Council, 2024).

The *objective* of this analysis is to identify and view and discuss the challenges posed by the beginning of the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova from the perspective of a geopolitical contextualization and under the influence of internal identity cleavages, with an emphasis on the reality in Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia.

The *research questions* are: 1. What are the geopolitical challenges and how do they act upon the endeavors of approach of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union; 2. How do the separatist and centrifugal tendencies in Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia act and influence the process of accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU?

From a methodological point of view, in order to understand the internal and geopolitical contextualization, we consider a diachronic analytical approach, as well as an explanatory-descriptive one, following in particular the evolution of the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU after the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

### **The geopolitical challenges for enhancing of the Republic of Moldova's approach to the EU**

From a geopolitical view, the Central and Eastern European space at the beginning of the IIIrd millennium was marked by then European Union enlargement and NATO expansion to the east, and also by the tendency of the Russian Federation to reposition itself as a relevant actor, to regain the influence of Moscow from the USSR times, inclusively through the exercise of military force on neighbors. The scene of the international system is increasingly moving towards a multi-polar world, with a more prominent role for China. All these were added to the multiple crises that the European space in particular had to face: from the economic and financial crisis, to the very high pressure of migration generated by multiple factors, including the instability in the Near East and North Africa, to the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine.

The evolution of the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union was greatly influenced, in particular, by several events and processes having a strong geopolitical impact:

- The NATO expansion by including the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, to the borders of the former Soviet Union, including the Baltic countries
- The 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement
- The War in Georgia of 2008
- The launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009
- The Russian aggression in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea in 2014
- The war launched by Russia after the invasion of Ukraine after February 2022

After the launch of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003, with regard to the external relations of the European Union, it constituted a support and starting point, the results of which were noted by the European Commission as positive from the first years (European Commission 2004). Thus, "*the ENP strengthened relations with partner countries and brought concrete benefits to both the Union and its partners, including the launch of regional initiatives and support for democratization in the European neighborhood*" (JOUE 2014). Seen in a regional context, the ENP appears against the background of the expansion of the EU to the East, in conjunction with the change in Russia's strategy towards Eastern Europe.

Shortly after the accession of the former communist states from the Central and Eastern Europe area (the 2004 and 2007 enlargement), the EU was forced to *reform its European Neighbourhood Policy*. This was not due to the fact that the new eastern neighbours were too much of a challenge for the EU, although it can also be said that, but the fact that this period brought a lot of changes to its external border. New neighbour countries were less stable. In the East, the European partners faced big problems, both of an internal nature, and especially because of the pressure, including of a military nature on the part of Russia. The European Union has been put in a position to protect its partners confronted with an increasingly expansive Russian state. The Georgia crisis of 2008 or the conflict in Ukraine after 2014 are eloquent for this reality to which the EU had to adapt (For more details to be seen Brie 2017, p. 55-71).

Retrospectively viewed, the process of the Euro-Atlantic expansion to the east was marked by oscillating developments in relations with the Russian Federation. Diachronically following the events after the fall of the Iron Curtain, we find that the shy initiatives of openness to cooperation between Russia and the West in the first decade after the collapse of the USSR were abandoned along the way. Russia began increasingly to consider the approach of former communist states to NATO and then to the EU as a threat to its own security, a process that affects its regional and geopolitical interests.

Contextually, beginning with the year 2000 when Vladimir Putin became the president of the Russian Federation, the vision of this state towards the West changed. If in the case of the Yeltsin government we could observe a policy aimed at cooperation, in the case of Putin, he affirms the right and necessity of the "independence" of Russian politics. The concept of independence does not refer to the internal independence of the policies of this state, but it must rather be understood in an antithetical relationship to the EU, and especially to NATO, therefore externally. From the perspective of this thesis, Russia is in a continuous state of external threat generated by its geographical position (lack of maritime borders, expansion of the EU and NATO to the East and the growth of China's influence in the West) (Tsygankov 2012, p. 31). Such a perception can generate two types of strategies: on the one hand, one can talk about a foreign policy the purpose of which is to defend one's own interests, thus a *defensive policy* (characteristic of the period 2000-2008, until the outbreak of the Georgian war). After 2008, the direction of Russian policy strategy changes and generates a pattern with aggressive accents, elements that can be observed in the war in Ukraine (after 2014), thus an *offensive policy* (Bărbulescu *et al.* 2016, p. 63). Russia has often used concepts such as "Russian-Soviet identity" (Perepelytsia 2010, p. 105) when it considered the identity of the ex-Soviet European space (especially with reference to Ukraine). Under this paradigm, Ukrainians were considered to be "Russians who speak one of the dialects of the Russian language" (Perepelytsia 2010, p.105). Russia perceives Eastern Europe as part of its immediate neighborhood, a historical legacy of the Tsarist imperial *hinterland*, the "other Russias".

This space (area), which includes Ukraine, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova or the Caucasian countries, is -at most- a region that separates it from the EU and NATO, but in no way part of the Western system. The use of symbolic, cultural and religious values, the so-called „*Ruski mir*” (the Russian world/Russian cultural area) is what Russia often refers to. Last but not least, the *ideology of "Eurasianism"* (widely discussed in the specialized literature) is used to justify Russia's right to intervene in the post-Soviet states. In this way, Russia perceives any rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine with the EU/NATO as a loss of its own influence in the area.

This is the context in which the ENP[The European Neighbourhood Policy] evolved and was reformed. In 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched, after the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was more clearly shaped in Paris in 2008, thus consolidating the regional component of the ENP. The reforming of the European Neighborhood Policy has conferred a particular touch to the eastern part of Europe. By initiating the Eastern Partnership, the EU aimed to strengthen and deepen the ENP in the former Soviet Eastern European space. The Eastern Partnership therefore represents the specific eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The declared aim of this initiative was to support and accelerate the rapprochement of the states of Eastern Europe with the Union. The partnership was based on common values such as democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, the application of the principles of the market economy, sustainable development and good governance. The EaP is grounded on "common interests and commitments, as well as shared involvement and responsibility", being "governed by the principles of differentiation and conditionality"." (The European Commission 2009, p. 5). The EU leaders welcomed and accepted the Polish-Swedish project, delegating the European Commission to conceptualize the new program and come up with proposals, concrete ways, to implement the project by the spring of 2009. At the same time, at the European Council in Brussels, on June 19th-20th 2008, the need to promote the eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy and to deepen regional cooperation between the EU's eastern neighbours was reiterated. (The EU Council 2008, p. 19). The European Commission was mandated by the European Council and invited "to prepare a proposal on the Eastern Partnership" (The EU Council 2009). The Russian military intervention in Georgia led the European Council, meeting in extraordinary session on September 1st 2008, to examine the regional effects of the new geopolitical context and to request the Commission to expedite the process of the EaP initiative. (The EU Council 2009). The need for a single and cohesive political sphere regarding the Eastern Neighbourhood was evident. The steps taken towards the development of a coherent policy, accompanied by specific European programmes and instruments, gained substance with the organisation of the first *Summit of the Eastern Partnership in Prague* (May 7-th, 2009). The Eastern Partnership was designed to complement the European Neighborhood Policy and was intended to intensify political and economic integration, none of the six ex-Soviet states obtaining promises regarding eventual accession to the European Union (Rinnert 2013, p.

2). As part of the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership created direct links between the ENP and the European integration and enlargement policy (Bocková & Lenč 2014, p. 161; Kochenov 2009, p. 29).

From the very first years of the existence of the EaP, one can see the beginning of an increasingly clear differentiation in the future relations of the six with the EU. The *more for more* principle is increasingly targeted by European officials in response to the different aspirations of partners (especially after the *PaE Summit in Warsaw* in September 2011). In the period after the *Vilnius Summit* (November 2013), this redefining of the paradigm in which the ENP was seen, was also required by the fact that the EaP somewhat reached its limits under the conditions of the annexation of Crimea and the open conflict in Ukraine. The European Union proved constrained in managing the Ukrainian crisis in the period between the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian invasion in February 2022. On a symbolic level, in the immediate period of the context of 2014, the process of the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine with the European Union was deliberately accelerated by the EU. Thus, despite some obvious lack of concrete steps of a reforming-integrating nature, these states receive certain benefits with a high impact on the media and public perception of integration. The Republic of Moldova, because it was almost the only one that remained within the parameters established in the context of Vilnius, but also because the EU wanted to send clear messages to the others, became the first country in the Eastern Partnership to benefit from a visa-free travel regime (April 2014). Subsequently, these three states signed bilateral Association Agreements with the EU. The other three states (Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan) repositioned themselves in the context of geopolitical changes, taking a step back in their relationship with the EU. (Brie, 2022).

*The EaP Summit in Riga* (May 21st-22nd 2015) was marked by mutual assurances that the EaP would continue and that the ENP represented a viable solution for Eastern Europe. The European leaders reaffirm the particular importance the EU gives to the Eastern Partnership as a „specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy”. The summit joint declaration reaffirms the shared vision regarding „this strategic and ambitious partnership as one based on mutual interests and commitments and supporting reform processes” promoted in the EaP partner states (The EU Council 2015, p.1). We cannot but notice the change in the perspective in which things are presented: each state can decide its level of European integration, respectively the areas of cooperation or the objectives it aspires to in its relationship with the EU. The "sovereignty" of the partner states is reaffirmed (The EU Council 2015a, p. 1), not only in relation to possible (potential) aggressors (such as the Russian one!), but also in relation to the proximity to the European Union. In the text of the joint declaration the tone and message is much more cautious regarding the horizon of European expansion to the east (Matache-Zaharia 2015, p. 254). The shift from the *multilateral*, common *dimension* of the EaP implementation framework to the *bilateral dimension*, specific and applicable differently to each partner, is evident. Thus, "the differentiated relationship between the EU and the six sovereign and independent partners" (The EU Council, 2015, p. 3) is a priority for multilateral cooperation platforms that are addressed only at a general-declarative level (Brie,

2022). The reforming of the EaP by moving the emphasis from the multilateral dimension to the bilateral one and on the *more-for-more* principle highlights the flexibility of EU policies regarding the EaP in direct agreement with the limitations given by these national interests correlated to the specific geopolitical context.

The sixth *EaP Summit in Brussels* (December 15th, 2021) brought together only five of the partners: **Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine**. Belarus has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership, but the EU is determined to continue cooperating with the Belarusian people (EaP Summit 2021a)<sup>1</sup>.

The text of the joint declaration (EaP Summit 2021b) contains a reaffirmation of the EU's commitment to the EaP states, welcoming the agreements that the Eastern partners and the EU have concluded or are currently undergoing negotiation:

the full entry into force of association agreements and deep and comprehensive free trade areas with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine

the entry into force of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CPA) between the EU and Armenia in March 2021

progress registered in the negotiations between the EU and Azerbaijan on a new comprehensive agreement

The EU recognized the initiative of the *trio* of associated partners (Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) to strengthen their cooperation with the EU (Summit EaP 2021b).

The Ukrainian issue, however, has highlighted once again the limits of the EaP (more details to be seen in Brie, 2022). Moreover, the 2015-2024 period revealed and outlined major geopolitical blockages and repositioning moves. Thus, the EaP[PaE] Format has reached its limits<sup>2</sup>. What is even more, from many perspectives we can consider that this initiative of the European Union is a failure in the sense of its regional dimension. The initial project had to be adapted to a bilateral dimension and a sectoral deepening based on the *more for more* principle. Even if some states, of which the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia<sup>3</sup> or as of late Armenia, prove obvious progress in the bilateral relationship with the EU with regard to the year 2009, when the EaP was launched, in our opinion, these rapprochement relations have gone beyond the EaP framework/format. The European agenda has adapted itself to the new reality. We find that the regional challenges are very big. At the bilateral level, relations are marked by the new geopolitical context. Belarus has self-suspended itself from the partnership.

1 "The EU regrets the decision of the Belarusian authorities to suspend their participation in the Eastern Partnership and looks forward to resuming cooperation with them as soon as the necessary conditions for a peaceful democratic transition are created to develop a common agenda based on shared values and interests" (Summit EaP 2021a).

2 The sixth EaP Summit in Brussels (December 15, 2021) brought together only five of the partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Belarus has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership, but the EU is determined to continue cooperating with the Belarusian people. "The EU regrets the decision of the Belarusian authorities to suspend its participation in the Eastern Partnership and looks forward to the resumption of cooperation with them as soon as the necessary conditions are created for a peaceful democratic transition in order to develop a common agenda based on common values and shared interests" (EaP Summit 2021a).

3 In recent years, the position of this state has been oscillating in relation to the process of getting closer to the EU and the trend of the first decade within the EaP.

Ukraine has to face an aggressive Russian invasion. Armenia and Azerbaijan failed to overcome in a constructive manner under the umbrella of the EU the tense episodes of the tortuous course of the conflictual bilateral relations generated by the Nagorno-Karabakh issues. Georgia and the Republic of Moldova live under direct threat in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war and are forced to be much more attentive to the separatist republics supported by Russia on their territory.

In this new context, the European Union is forced to adapt 'on the way' its policies regarding the eastern neighborhood. The limits of eastward expansion are obvious. At the same time, the EU cannot afford to abandon its partners to whom it can offer limited concrete solutions in the current geopolitical context.

By an analysis of policies, context and outcomes, we identify **the current limits of EaP** in three main directions (without excluding other perspectives) (this section is a synthesis of the analysis found in Brie 2022):

The limits of the EU's reduced commitment in relation to the integration of the EaP states

The general geopolitical context and Russia's opposition to this project in particular

The specific national interests of the EaP states

The *EU's limited commitment to the European integration of the EaP states* was evident from the very beginning of this partnership project. Until the end of 2023, the EU has always avoided offering a clear accession perspective to the six EaP states. Despite numerous political statements of support from European leaders, there have not been offered firm guarantees and commitments accompanied by precise deadlines to any of the six partners.

The limits of the EU's commitment were already apparent in 2011. Despite progress made in particular by the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, during the Warsaw Summit, the EU gave the impression of the existence of political and geopolitical limits. The Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk – a politician who would mark the next period of European politics – said „*We know that Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine had higher expectations from this summit: they wanted a clear perspective of joining the Union. But we do not have sufficient conditions in place to provide a clear outlook. We are waiting for all the conditions to be met, then we can move forward.*” (EaP Summit, 2011).

In the new context after 2014, it is obvious that the simple reforming of states, accompanied by the implementation of EU policies and the *acquis*, is no longer sufficient in order to achieve European enlargement. The ENP, as it was conceived, no longer corresponds to geopolitical realities. It suffices to recall that the ENP had long been seen as a kind of "antechamber" for the enlargement of the European Union. Forced to take into account a complex combination of factors, the EU is not taking any chances/nor can it afford to promise accession to the EaP states. This reality is given by both the external context, including the geopolitical one, and the internal EU context. The latter is also related to the erosion of the momentum of enlargement after the accession waves of 2004, 2007 and 2013. Many states have become reluctant to expand further. The financial and economic crisis, which has shifted the focus much more towards domestic political issues has undoubtedly contributed this state of affairs. The need for institutional reform, but also the increasingly complicated geopolitical context (the conflict in Ukraine; the situation in the Middle East and North Africa; the refugee/immigrant crisis; trade tensions

and the paradigm shifts in US foreign and security policy that marked Donald Trump's presidency, etc.) are likely to further complicate this picture. Last but not least, another vulnerability of the EU common policies regarding the neighborhood, visible also in the period after the Riga Summit, is given by the security dimension in the ENP approach. This proves to be insufficiently clear and not correlated with the current geopolitical situation, security thus proving to be a "weak point" (Gogolashvili, 2015, p. 18) on the agenda of the European neighborhood (Bărbulescu *et al.*, 2016, pp. 110-111). The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 confirmed the blockages and shortcomings of the EaP, but also the limits of the guarantees that the EU could have given to the EaP states (Brie, 2017, p. 63-66).

***The general geopolitical context and Russia's opposition to this project, in particular,*** have shaped the policies of the EaP member states. Brutal Russian interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (after 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, with the support of the separatists from the east, and primarily through the military invasion that began on February 24, 2022) were associated with the total subjugation of Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime to Putin, but also the maintenance of a constantly tense atmosphere in Transnistrian region and especially in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The conclusion that results from a simple analysis is that the states that did not accept the political and geopolitical orientation drawn by the Russian Federation were forced to face internal and external challenges supported by the Russians, often of a military nature. The invasion and war in Ukraine are eloquent for the Russian Federation's response to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic orientation.

Putin's public speech and political actions reveal a rhetoric that often refers to the glorious imperialist past of his own history that he would like to revive, if only in the minds of his own citizens whom he mobilizes in support of such projects in relation to internal and external enemies (Brie, 2018, p. 239). The glorification of the past of the *tsarist* empire, but also of the Soviet Union, highlight Russian ambitions that undermine the stability and balance of the international system. In fact, the entire foundation of the current world order was shaken with the invasion of Ukraine because the principles of international law were flagrantly violated. Moreover, Russia was not condemned by all relevant actors, it benefits from economic and military support especially from China or India. Last but not least, regimes hostile to the West and previously isolated have gained importance through the development of the relationship with Russia (North Korea and Iran are included here). For the Russian Federation, the entire international ostracism, accompanied by the drastic sanctions and corroborated with the huge cost represented by the war in Ukraine, weighed less than blocking Ukraine's free route to the West. This highlights once in a pulse the stakes established by Putin and his regime in view of the withdrawal of its own sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

The Russian aggressiveness at all levels has thus put pressure on the fragile European integration initiatives that had begun to develop in the EaP states, and the EU could not respond effectively through the mechanisms it had at its disposal.

***The specific national interests of the EaP States,*** often divergent in relation to European integration have also led to the failure to meet the original objectives of the EaP. The level of ambition in relation to European integration proved to be different in the six states. Moreover, some of the states have never even expressed themselves in this direction, the EaP being rather seen as an instrument of pragmatic facilitating of some economic gains, not integrating political implications.

The national interests of the EaP states did not diverge only in relation to the objectives of European integration, they proved to be divergent in many cases and in relation to neighbouring partners in the partnership.

Without aiming at making here a synthetic presentation of the specific interests of the six EaP states (this can be found in Brie, 2022), we mention that the analysis of specific interests highlights the limited levels of ambitions of each of the EaP States. Actually, reforming the EaP by shifting the emphasis from the multilateral to the bilateral dimension and the *more-for-more* principle highlights the flexibility of EU policies on the EaP in direct agreement with the limitations given by them national interests related to the specific geopolitical context.

The pro-European orientation of the *Republic of Moldova* is clearly expressed by the application for opening accession negotiations, receiving the status of candidate country and, on June 25th 2024, the official opening of the first intergovernmental conference in the accession negotiations with Ukraine (European Council, 2024). The process is complicated. Chişinău must also take into account the regional context, the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict, as well as the Russian support granted to Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia.

The war triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine after February 2022 complicated the geopolitical context, introducing significant repositionings and mutations on the international scene. The EU has reassessed its policies on the eastern neighbourhood area, including that of the EaP states. An obvious opening is manifested by the beginning of the accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The two states remain procedurally connected, being placed together in the process. In anticipation of a diplomatic solution to the military conflict, Ukraine will have to take into account in the post-war period the future clauses and the joint commitment to ending the war. This reality, in the absence of a solution in the short or medium term, is not to the advantage of the Republic of Moldova, which could see its accession delayed for geopolitical reasons that are easy to understand.

The geopolitical reality generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights an existing gap between the West and the East, to which the states that tried, until now, to have a policy of neutrality must resort to. In this respect, we can also understand the new NATO enlargement achieved through the inclusion of Finland and Sweden in 2023 (NATO, 2024). The Russian Federation, through its abusive intervention in Ukraine and its obvious disdain for international law, has acquired the image of an aggressor who has no limits on violent actions in relation to its neighbors. The status of neutrality and international treaties no longer represent the guarantor of national security in the classical sense or in the sense of the new threats posed by the hybrid war. This was the context that prompted the states in the Russian neighborhood to look for security guarantees near NATO (this approach can be noticed at various levels, from a sectoral cooperation, partnerships and until joining the military bloc). The Republic of Moldova is in a similar situation. The status of neutrality did not weigh heavily in front of the many Russian leaders who posed direct threats of militated action against this state (often taking advantage of the complicated context of the management of the frozen conflict in Transnistrian region, the evolution of relations with the autonomous region of Gagauzia or the situation of the Russian-speaking minority in the Republic of Moldova).

In a broader context, the EU is also repositioning itself in relation to the acceleration of the integration process of the Western Balkans. The new geopolitical

reality requires adequate responses and leads to a different order of internal and external affairs of the European Union.

Moreover, the internal consensus at the level of the EU decision-making process suffers in the context of the prolongation of the Ukrainian crisis. Some states see their economic interests threatened against the background of international sanctions against Russia, especially in the field of energy resources supply (see the positioning of Hungary, Austria, Slovakia, but not only).

The Republic of Moldova is seriously affected by the war in Ukraine economically, socially, but also at the level of national and societal security. Then the hybrid war supported by Russia against this vulnerable state contribute to a process of erosion of democracy and threatening the consolidation of the rule of law and political balance. Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia are used by Russia to generate instability and to block the initiatives of the Chişinău authorities related to the European integration process. The frozen war in Transnistrian region in the context of the events in Ukraine has shown several times signs that it can be reactivated. Political leaders from ATU Gagauzia publicly support, including through visits to Moscow, Putin's regime and its policies towards the Republic of Moldova and its European integration.

In view of supporting the Republic of Moldova, with the aim of reducing the major effects of the Ukrainian crisis, the *Partnership Platform for the Republic of Moldova was created*. (PPRM). This project was launched at the initiative of France, Germany and Romania in 2022. "The Partnership Platform for Moldova has proven to be a useful tool for coordinating efforts and resources from various parties involved in addressing the significant internal and external challenges faced by the Republic of Moldova." (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). The first editions of the Partnership Platform for Moldova took place in Berlin (April 5th, 2022), Bucharest (July 15th, 2022), Paris (November 21st, 2022) and Chişinău (October 17th, 2023). More than 50 partner countries and international organizations came together, reaffirming their strong support for the Republic of Moldova, especially due to the effects of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

In preparation for the PPRM Conferences, meetings of thematic working groups are held, established on 6 pillars: *humanitarian effort* (managing the flow of refugees and their resettlement in European states); *energy* (supporting the energy security of the Republic of Moldova); *the fight against corruption* (supporting the government in implementing the ambitious reform agenda); inclusively in the field of in the areas of justice, fighting corruption and promoting economic development); *border management* (internal affairs and effective border management); *financial assistance* (increasing socio-economic resilience); *administrative reform and public financial management*.

The fifth PPRM conference took place on September 17, 2024 in Chişinău and brought together over 65 international delegations with the aim of mobilizing and focusing aid from developed countries for the Republic of Moldova. The aim is to generate political, financial and material assistance, as well as in-depth expertise for the democratic reform process of the Republic of Moldova. On the occasion of this event, several financing agreements worth 380 million euros were signed, in the form of grants and loans (RRA, 2024). "Support in the amount of around 25 million Euros will be allocated for assistance from the World Bank and the European Union, which will enable the Republic of Moldova to develop the energy system in order to prevent energy wringing, which can still take place," the head of French diplomacy said in Chişinău. (RRA, 2024). In her turn, the German Foreign Minister, Anaelna Baerbock, declared

that she "will continue to support the Republic of Moldova in front of the Russian Federation's aggression and interference in the democratic processes of the Republic of Moldova." (RRA, 2024). "*The Republic of Moldova is not alone, and the meeting is proof of this*", the head of diplomacy from Bucharest, Luminița Odobescu declared. She also emphasized on this occasion that "Romania has been and will always be by the side of the Republic of Moldova", drawing attention to the aggressive information war that Russia is waging in the Republic of Moldova (RRA, 2024). The Romanian Foreign Minister "also highlighted the bilateral cooperation agenda with the Republic of Moldova, which includes interconnection projects in the fields of energy and transport, but also a complex support program for the benefit of the Republic of Moldova by sending government experts from Romania to provide support in the negotiation process for accession to the European Union." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). On the other hand, according to the statement of the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* from Bucharest, "Romania continues to provide financial support for the projects proposed by the authorities from Chișinău based on the Agreement between the Government of Romania and the Government of the Republic of Moldova regarding the implementation of the technical and financial assistance program based on a non-refundable financial aid in the amount of 100 million Euros granted by Romania to the Republic of Moldova" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

*The supporting of joint projects or those from the Republic of Moldova has benefited from considerable financial support from the Romanian state and the EU in the last decade. On the occasion of the final conference of the cross-border cooperation program Romania-Republic of Moldova 2014-2020 which took place in Chișinău on March 7th, 2024, an assessment of these projects was made.* The event brought together the structures that managed the program from the two countries, the beneficiaries of the projects, diplomatic missions in Chișinău and representatives of the European Commission. "Romania and the Republic of Moldova share an experience of over 20 years of cross-border cooperation, supported by the European Union. We have invested almost 100 million Euros in the modernization of medical units, in the rehabilitation and equipping of schools and universities on both sides of the border, in the rehabilitation of roads and the efficiency of border crossing points. We are preparing ourselves to invest a similar amount in the period 2021-2027 and we hope to have projects at least as good, for the benefit of local communities", Aurel-Dragoș Drăghescu said, Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration from Romania, present at the event (Romania-Republic of Moldova. ENI-Cross Border Cooperation, 2024). „*The results with great impact achieved within the Romania-Republic of Moldova cross-border cooperation program, supported by European Union funds, reconfirm this strong partnership that generates opportunities for growth, concrete benefits for people and a better life on both banks of the Prut,*" Artur Mija stated, the general secretary of the Government of the Republic of Moldova added (Romania-Republic of Moldova. ENI-Cross Border Cooperation, 2024). By the *Cooperation Program Romania - Republic of Moldova 2014-2020*, 81 projects totaling 99 million Euros were financed, funds that were invested in the rehabilitation of roads, in the modernization of schools, universities and hospitals, in the preparation of institutions and the population for emergency situations, as well as in the restoration and promotion of the objectives tourist centers located on both banks of the Prut (Structural Funds, 2024).

### **The Internal Contextualization: The Challenges of Managing the Frozen Conflict in Transnistrian region and Developments in ATU Gagauzia**

The discussions and developments in the relations between the EU and the Republic of Moldova are influenced and marked both in terms of contradictions and determinisms, by the management of the situation in the Transnistrian and Găgăuz regions. The EU is obliged to take into account the special situation of these regions. Moreover, the government of the Republic of Moldova is encouraged to resolve these identity disputes peacefully and in an integrative manner.

The origin of the *Transnistrian conflict* can be found in the last years of the existence of the USSR, when the political class of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was divided on two fundamental issues: the nature of the relations between Chişinău and Moscow and the place of the Russian or Romanian languages in the public domain. While the political forces, which pursued the dual goal of separation from the Soviet Union and increasing the role and status of the Romanian language, took control in Chişinău, some of the Soviet officials who wanted to preserve the Soviet Union established, with the support of the influential Moscow political circles, an alternative center of political power at Tiraspol (Victor, 2024). Beyond this perspective, somewhat simplistic and idealistic, it is absolutely obvious that the conflict outbreak on the territory of the Republic of Moldova was inspired, stimulated and used by the power in Moscow. This pattern has also been used in the case of other former Soviet republics in order to maintain effective control over all republics to counteract their natural aspirations for sovereignty, freedom and national revival (Stăvilă & Bălan, 2010, p. 4). The proclamation of independence by the Republic of Moldova, on August 27th, 1991, led to a deterioration of relations between Chişinău and Tiraspol (Rusnac, 2022). Although the first fight(ing) between the forces controlled by the Chişinău authorities and the separatist troops took place on December 13th, 1991, the war broke out *de facto* on the night of March 1st-2nd, 1992, when the separatists attacked the headquarters of the police station in Dubăsari (Rusnac, 2022). The stage of the military conflict lasted until July 21st, 1992, but the political dispute continued and persists even nowadays. On 21 July 21-st 1992, in Moscow, the president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin and the president of the Republic of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, together with the separatist leader Igor Smirnov, signed a Convention establishing the principles of the peaceful settlement of the armed conflict. The settlement was in effect a freeze of the conflict that perpetuated and ensured continued Russian interests and control in the region. Russian soldiers were kept in the region with the stated purpose of "maintaining the peace".

The numerous and complex negotiations to resolve this frozen conflict have not resulted in a lasting peace regardless of the negotiation format so far.

The territorial reintegration of the country benefited throughout this period of special attention from the government in Chişinău. At the level of its structures, there is a portfolio of deputy prime minister for reintegration with the role of coordinating the activities related to this endeavor. Through the coordination of this structure, in the period 2011-2023, 13 government programs for the reintegration of the country were implemented, which provided for allocations for 544 projects, worth over 170 million lei (MLD), with the objective of solving pressing problems in The Security Zone (Area), sustainable community development, achieving the desired reintegration of the country (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). On May 15th, 2024, the members of the Government approved the program of activities for the reintegration of the country for the year 2024, which provides for the financing of 26 projects of sustainable development,

infrastructure modernization, institutional support and community interest to be implemented in the localities of the Area of Security (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

Despite the efforts and various public policies coordinated from Chisinau, reintegration remains a difficult goal to manage and to achieve. The Transnistrian conflict cannot be resolved without the demilitarization of the Transnistrian region, and the right moment could come when the situation in the war in Ukraine is clarified, the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian said in an interview for the public television station Moldova 1 (Radio *Europa Liberă* [Free Europe] Moldova, 2024). Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Moscow can no longer rotate its military from Transnistrian region, so it has resorted to recruiting men from the region, where about 200,000 people with Russian passports are said to live. *„There are many military or militarized entities with which we have to see what to do, because the fact that the Russian flag of a military unit will leave the Transnistrian region will not mean the solution to the problem. The right moment for resolving this issue, without which we cannot move forward in the political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, will undoubtedly appear when the situation in the war in Ukraine becomes clearer, as we wish”*, the deputy prime minister for reintegration also said (Radio *Europa Liberă* [Free Europe] Moldova, 2024).

In the process of bringing the Republic closer to the EU, the Transnistrian issue proved to be a difficult problem to manage. It is difficult to imagine European integration without being able to have the full exercise of national sovereignty and control of the entire territory by the government from Chişinău. Then, the Republic of Moldova, but also the EU, seem willing to make concessions to Tiraspol in order to determine a proactive reaction and facilitate a deepening of economic integration that would at least stimulate the Transnistrian elites to be more open to dialogue with Chişinău. The separatist regime in Tiraspol can still use its energy leverage to extract certain commercial concessions from Chişinău, inclusively with the permission of the EU institutions. These concessions could be perceived by Moldova and the EU as a temporary price paid to limit the range of instability generated by the war in Ukraine (Cenuşă, 2023). Ukraine is also determined to support the Republic of Moldova in the reintegration process. This has already been signaled by Volodymyr Zelenskiy on the sidelines of the European Political Community summit in June 2023, on which occasion he expressed his confidence that the Transnistrian issue will end with the end of the war in Ukraine (Radio Chişinău, June 2023).

Not solving the Transnistrian conflict is a threat to the national security of Moldova and Ukraine. Therefore, both sides are interested in eliminating the Russian political-military presence from the Transnistrian region, preferably immediately after the end of the war (Cenuşă, 2023). In the event of a diplomatic or military arrangement favorable to Russia, the latter could demand concessions related to the restoration of the transit of Russian military units through Ukraine, previously possible under the 1998 agreement, canceled in 2015, to bring the Transnistrian region out of its isolation (Cenuşă, 2023). In the equation of negotiations between Chişinău and Tiraspol, the position of the separatist regime has lost its previous advantages. Russia, weakened by the effort of the war and international sanctions, supports the regime in Tiraspol less and less. Moreover, against the backdrop of the Ukrainian blockade there is an obvious logistical barrier. In the same direction, Tiraspol's energy advantage in negotiations with the right bank is significantly losing ground as a result of deepening the energy

interconnection of the Republic of Moldova with Romania. Planned to be put into operation no earlier than 2025, the high voltage line that will connect Chişinău to the Isaccea-Vulcăneşti interconnection will provide direct electricity to Chişinău, avoiding the transmission networks that intersect the Transnistrian region. Also, this interconnection will enable reducing the risks related to Russian attacks on the Ukrainian energy infrastructure. At the same time, the electricity received from the EU will be able to reach the territory controlled by the Chişinău authorities without risking disconnections from Tiraspol (Cenusă, 2023).

On the other hand, in view of the foreseeable cessation of the transit of Russian gas via Ukraine after January 1, 2025, the Transnistrian regime is compelled to make concessions. Getting the Russian gas to Tiraspol could stop suddenly and earlier if the gas compression station at Sudja (Russian territory now controlled by Ukrainian forces) were affected by the bombing in the area. The lack of Russian gas would generate a humanitarian disaster in Transnistrian region. The pressure is, therefore, now even greater on Tiraspol. This is all the more so since, anticipating the situation and benefiting from the direct support of the EU and Romania, the Republic of Moldova has taken decisive steps in the process of finding alternative sources of supply. It is certain that the government in Chisinau can no longer be blackmailed by Moscow via Tiraspol through the energy issue. In the context of the possible deterioration of the situation in the Transnistrian region, Chisinau has a scenario of keeping the region 'afloat' through a dialogue of reconciliation and reintegration. "At the same time, we will have to absorb the consequences for the Transnistrian region. We understand that there is a very limited payment capacity on the left bank of the Dniester and we cannot allow a humanitarian crisis to occur there," said Victor Parlicov, Moldovan Minister of Energy. (Călugăreanu, 2024).

The path to territorial reintegration is difficult and must first be deepened at the economic level. The rapprochement with the EU and its socio-economic benefits can generate positive effects in the relationship with Transnistrian region. "The separatist region of Transnistria will be at least economically integrated into the Republic of Moldova by 2030". Thus, "...at least at the economic level, the region should be practically integrated into a customs, fiscal, and monetary area with the right bank" were the statements made by the Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian. This economic integration will represent more than half of the actual process of integrating Transnistrian region within the Republic of Moldova. (Pricop, 2024). The first steps have been taken since this year. From January 1st, 2024, the new Customs Code of the Republic of Moldova entered into force, by which companies from Transnistrian region will have to pay customs duties to the budget of the Republic of Moldova.

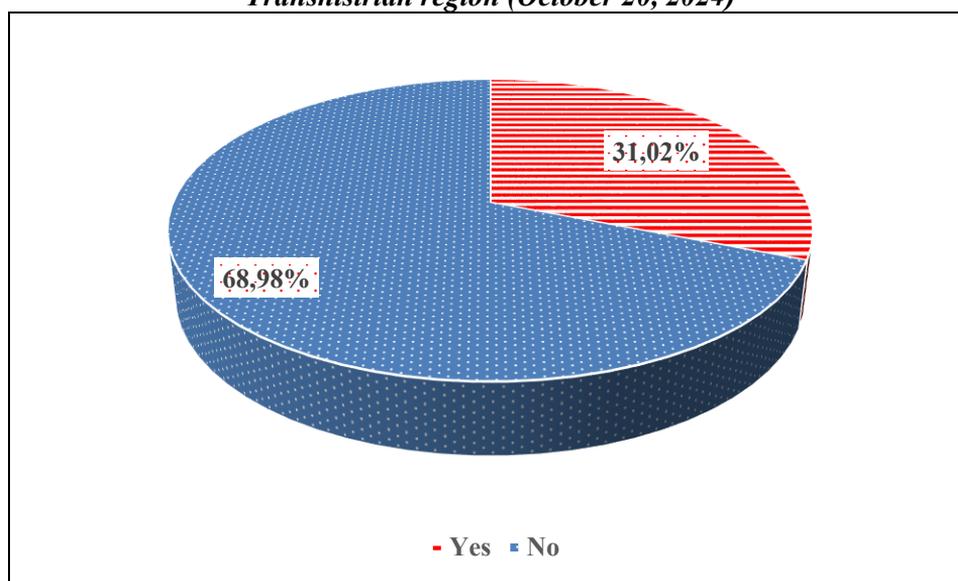
Until then the challenge remains. In order to break the deadlock, the Moldovan authorities are ready to accept the reality of European integration in two stages, whereby the first stage would be the accession of the part west of the Dniester, i.e. without Transnistrian region. Maia Sandu, the president of the Republic of Moldova stated in this case that "we want to integrate into the EU unified, with the Transnistrian conflict resolved, but if this cannot be done, then we are ready to integrate in two steps." (g4media.ro, 2024).

On October 20, 2024, during the referendum on amending the constitution in order to join the European Union, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova were asked to answer the question: "*Do you support amending the Constitution in order to join the*

*European Union?*”. This referendum was won by the pro-European side with only 50.46%, a reality that confirms the polarization and geopolitical fragmentation at the national level. This reality may have other explanations than those related to the community-identity dimension. This fragmentation is social, economic, political, but from our point of view it is also identity-based.

Only 31.02% of the citizens of the Transnistrian region answered “YES”. Thus, 68.98% of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). As the majority of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region assume the ethnic and linguistic Russian identity, we tend to deduce that this ethno-national community chose to vote against an initiative that would set the direction of Moldova's EU accession at the constitutional level. This behavior, in our opinion, can be extrapolated to other regions or localities where the Russian-speaking community is in the majority (of course, we cannot say that all Russians or Russian speakers voted NO in the referendum).

***Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Transnistrian region (October 20, 2024)***



Source: own drawing with information from the Central Electoral Commission, 2024

The evolution of the situation in the *Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia* is also complicated, especially at the political and identity level. The Găgăuz community has always been a border community. This reality is precisely due to the positioning, often controversial, between the Bulgarian, Turkish and more recently Russian identity of the members of this community. Apart from their controversial origin, their identity carries significant nuances along some historical stages that marked their existence. More and more, this community transformed its identity towards what today is a Russophile community, systematically supported by Moscow.

Without being very numerous (according to the 2004 census, it counted 147,500 members, of which 127,835 lived in the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit), this community stands out for the importance it had in the history of Bessarabia (The National

Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024a). According to the 2014 census data, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATU Gagauzia. According to the 2014 census data, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATU Gagauzia, of which 112,387 were Găgăuz (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024b).

The most accepted theory regarding their origin is that they are descendants of Turkic tribes, possibly Oghuz or even Seljuks. Other historians speak of the Cuman, Pecheneg or Bulgarian origin<sup>4</sup>. Certainties, however, are the Turkic origin of their language and the fact that they became Christians, renouncing Islam under the influence of Byzantium (Pârlog, 2012). Their presence in the area of Bessarabia is linked to a migration from the Bulgarian area to Dobrogea and Bessarabia at the end of the XVIIIth century. The annexation of Bessarabia by the tsarists transformed them in their dispute, often with the Turks, but also for the control of the new province, into Christian Orthodox allies increasingly willing to accept cultural-political rapprochement. In return, the Russians granted them privileges, tax exemptions, military service, a.o. (Pârlog, 2012). The Soviet period brought them even closer to the Russians as identity, so that now the Russian language is assumed at a collective level. After the Republic of Moldova won state independence, together with other minorities, they campaigned for the creation of an autonomous region of Gagauzia, culturally supported by Ankara, which opened a Turkish Cultural Center and a Turkish Library here. All this transforms this community into a border identity, one of cultural-identity contact.

ATU Gagauzia is perhaps the most Russophile region of the Republic of Moldova. A separatist entity in the early 1990s, ATU Gagauzia eventually accepted Chisinau's sovereignty, but claims the right to secede in the event of a union with Romania or even European integration. Moreover, the approaching to Russia, the visits made to Moscow and the pro-Russian policies of the bashkan woman Evghenia Guțul made her being included on the sanctions lists of the West. „*The USA imposed sanctions against Evghenia Guțul for involvement in hybrid actions against the state of the Republic of Moldova and its citizens, actions financed with money from criminal sources. The decision comes as a result of effective collaboration with our external partners and we will continue to take decisive measures to counter corruption and threats to national security*”, Dorin Recean, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova wrote in June 2024. Later on, on October 9th, 2024, the European Union also included in the list of those sanctioned for attempts to destabilize the Republic of Moldova five more people, among whom Evghenia Guțul is, the current bashkan of ATU Gagauzia, affiliated with the fugitive named Ilan Şor (HotNews.ro, 2024).

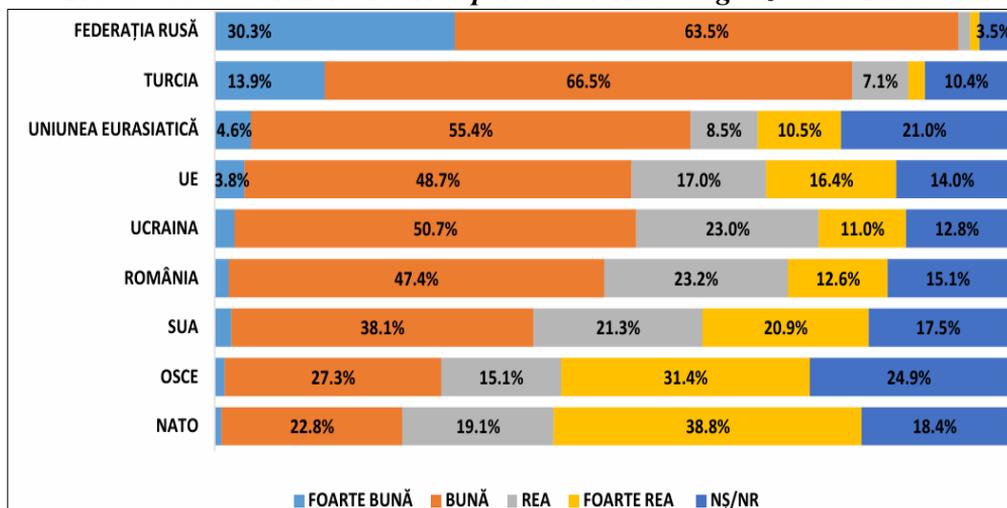
The perception of public opinion in ATU Gagauzia regarding the EU and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova was captured by the Public Policy Institute, which has been conducting opinion polls focused on the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district since 2011. The most recent one was published in 2022 and includes analyzes of some data collected in September-October 2021 (thus before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and during the period when Irina Vlah was still the bashkan of ATU Gagauzia). We mention the fact that on July 19, 2023, the new bashkan is

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<sup>4</sup> The Bulgarian historians consider them to be simple *Turkish-sized* Bulgarians who kept their Christian-Orthodox religious identity. According to <https://romaniabreakingnews.ro/cine-sunt-de-fapt-gagauzi-cei-folositi-azi-de-rusia-pe-post-de-unealta-geostrategica-si-amenintare-permanenta-la-adresa-suveranitati-integritatii-teritoriale-a-r-moldova/>, retrieved on Sept.16th 2024.

Evghenia Guțul, whose positions proved to be even more radical regarding the rapprochement with the Russian Federation and the opposition to the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova with the EU. However, the public perception towards EU rapprochement has improved in the post-2015 period in this region as well. In 2021, 17.6% would vote for joining the European Union (compared to only 3.6% in 2015) and 58% against joining (compared to 80% in 2015). If they were to choose between joining the European Union and joining the Eurasian Economic Union, then 44.1% would vote for joining the Eurasian Economic Union (86.9% in 2015) and 19% for joining the European Union (2.6 % in 2015) (Public Policy Institute, 2021, p. 34).

### *The attitude towards the external partners in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia*

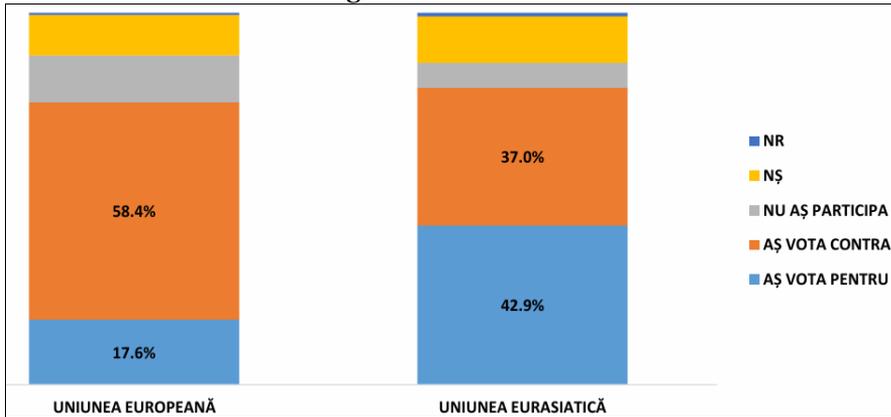


Source: Public Policies Institute, 2021, p. 34

It is therefore visible the preference of the population of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District for integration into the Eurasian Economic Union compared to the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. And the vote against is relevant to be analyzed, 58.4% would vote against joining the European Union.

The political messages were very radicalized in favor of a pro-Russian position in the context of the war in Ukraine, especially after the election of the new bashkan Evghenia Guțul (July 2023). The political evolution and the messages of the leaders of ATU Gagauzia in 2024 seem to lead to a scenario reminiscent of the situation in Transnistrian region in the early '90s. There is a visible attempt to link the region economically and politically to Russia. The agreement signed between Bashkan Guțul and Promsvyazbank, along with adherence to the Russian alternative financial infrastructure to SWIFT, called „Mir”, indicates an even deeper anchorage in the Russian sphere of influence. „These actions not only strengthen financial and economic ties, but create a structural dependency that can be difficult to reverse in the medium and long term. This, of course, if it materialized. „Mir” cards would rather be used to pay SHOR protesters and voters, to vote against the referendum on EU” accession, held on October 20th, 2024 (Pleșca, 2024).

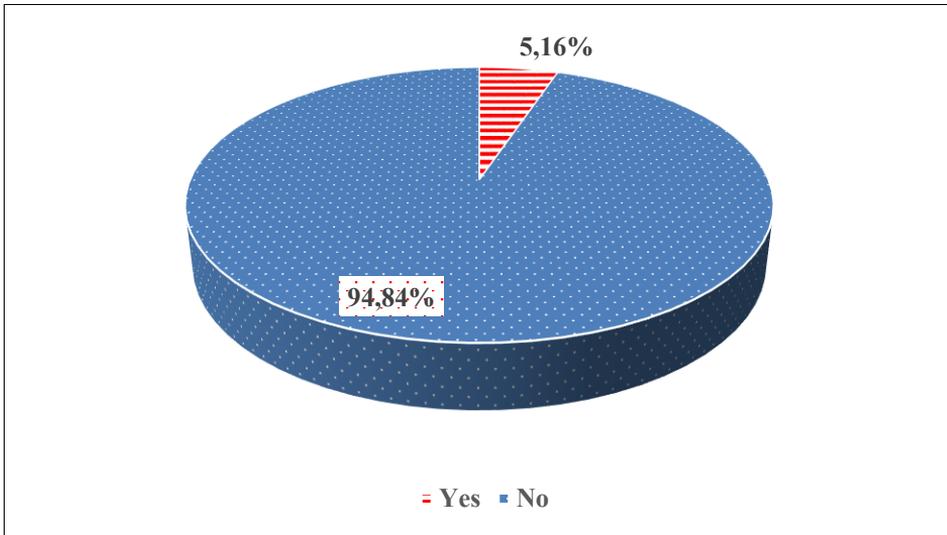
**Preferences in term of external integration of the Republic of Moldova in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia**



Source: Public Policies Institute, 2021, p. 34

During the referendum on accession to the European Union, only 5.16% of the citizens of the ATU Gagauzia answered yes. Thus, almost 95% of the Gagauzians present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

**Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Gagauz Autonomous Region (October 20, 2024)**



Source: own drawing with information from the Central Electoral Commission, 2024

In the case of this region, inhabited mainly by Gagauz, 57,847 people voted in this referendum, and only 2,985 were in favor of amending the Constitution in order to join the EU, while 54,862 people voted against.

We can conclude that the Gagauz people almost completely reject the idea of joining the EU, while at the same time preferring a geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation.

## Conclusions

The geopolitical context, but also by internal political changes have had a considerable impact on the dynamics and evolution of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. During the last two decades, the geopolitical reality has fundamentally changed in the area of Central and Eastern Europe. NATO and the EU expanded to the East by integrating former communist states, including some from the former USSR, into the Euro-Atlantic structures. Russia, once with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in 2000, returned to the policy of hostility, of direct competition in relation to the West. In the absence of political, economic or social arguments, Russia has forced the blockade of states and populations in its sphere of interest using military force and energy extortion. The Republic of Moldova was also drawn into this orbit. The population was vulnerable to manipulation and hybrid warfare. The result has been [and lead to] a fragmented society that often reacts disproportionately and uncertainly in the choices it makes. Russia has most often used identity cleavages that it has exploited in its own interest. Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia were used to exert pressure and control on the government in Chişinău.

The relations of the Republic of Moldova with the EU have been marked by oscillating developments in relation to internal political vectors. Keeping a distance or moving closer to the EU corresponded to electoral cycles, with governments or presidents against or in favor of getting closer to the EU. Generally, this reality of the geopolitical choices also overlapped with a similar policy in relation to Romania, but the opposite in relation to the Russian Federation. If, broadly speaking, the period of Igor Dodon's presidency was marked by the maintenance of a rapprochement with Russia and of a distance in relation to the EU and Romania, the subsequent period, after the election of Mrs. Maia Sandu as president, was characterized by a considerable effort to approach the EU and Romania.

The European support was considerable, and the political openness towards the Republic of Moldova, in the context of the deepening of cooperation in the bilateral framework conferred by the PaE through the more for more principle, attracted the population towards an increasingly obvious attachment to the EU and democratic values. After the 2014 moment, when Russia annexed Crimea, the EU was more careful and determined to stop the European course of the Republic of Moldova. Since 2014, the citizens of this state have had free access to the EU area, unrestricted by visa requirements.

Then followed the deepening within the Association Agreement and an integrative deepening at several levels, especially of an economic nature as a result of the expansion of customs agreements and the free trade area. The economy of the Republic of Moldova benefited from the opening of the single market for Moldovan products. These benefits were immediately transferred to Transnistrian region or ATU Gagauzia, despite the preservation of some political and societal barriers.

The geopolitical context and internal political reality of the Republic of Moldova was deeply marked by the war initiated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine after February 2022. This event complicated the general geopolitical context, triggering significant repositioning actions and mutations on the international stage. The EU has reassessed its policies regarding the Eastern Neighborhood area, including that of the EaP states. An obvious openness is manifested by the commencement of the accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The two states remain connected from a

procedural point of view, being placed together in this process. If in the first part of the process of drawing closer to the EU, through the special attention received from the EU and the opening of EU accession negotiations, the Republic of Moldova can be said to have been a beneficiary of the new geopolitical reality marked by the Ukrainian war, in the second stage things get complicated. The linkage to Ukraine can mean a delay in major decisions in the accession process in the event of a prolongation of the war or a cease-fire agreement that freezes the conflict or keeps the area in uncertainty at the junction of geopolitical interests. The equation of the intricate negotiations to be announced is also complicated by the EU's need to reposition itself in relation to the acceleration of the integration process of the Western Balkans. The new geopolitical reality requires adequate responses and leads to a different order of the internal and external affairs of the European Union.

In conclusion, the Republic of Moldova is seriously affected by the war in Ukraine economically, socially, but also at the level of national and societal security. The hybrid war supported by Russia against this vulnerable state contributes to a process of eroding democracy and threatens the strengthening of the rule of law and political balance. Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia are used by Russia to generate instability and to block the initiatives of the Chișinău authorities related to the European integration process. The 'frozen' war in Transnistrian region in the context of the events in Ukraine has repeatedly shown signs that it can be reactivated. Political leaders from ATU Gagauzia publicly support Putin's regime and its policies towards the Republic of Moldova and its European integration, inclusively by means of visits to Moscow.

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