

The Impact of Regional and International Evolutions on the Moldova's Europeanization Path

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Abstract:

The nowadays world has never reached such a level of uncertainty and insecurity as in the last decades when the political, economic and security developments at all levels shifted the balance of power in the Euro-Atlantic space and beyond. It's obvious that had a major impact on further countries' development and the Republic of Moldova is not an exception in this regard. This paper is analyzing the external context along with the main factors such as: the annexation of Crimea, the ongoing military confrontation on the Eastern territory of Ukraine, Russian influence in the region, the Trump's administration policy and the changing role of the USA on the international arena, the institutional crisis within the EU including the impact of the recent pandemic challenge etc. In result, that led to a new transformative world order and the effect on the less developed countries such as Moldova. Also, I identified a number of triggers that created premises to undermine the irreversibility of the Europeanization development of the country, such as: lost momentum concerning Moldova's progress on the economic and political association with the EU, a pro-Russian Moldovan elected president and a failed balanced foreign policy approach, lack of substantial reforms in accordance with the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, promoting the narrow interests of a small group close to Moldovan leadership etc. Instead of conclusion, I am highlighting possible developments of the current Moldovan political situation, emphasizing the importance of the upcoming presidential elections planned for the 1st November 2020. In particular, the parliamentary opposition role in an eventual change of the Moldovan political landscape aimed to maintain and advance on the country's Europeanization and modernization path of development.

Key words: *democracy, Europeanization, crisis, challenges, elections, new order*



The new (dis)order establishment

The international arena is dominated by the increased geopolitical tension between the United States of America, China and Russia, on the one hand, and the internal political challenges occurred within the European Union and NATO, on the other hand. Thus, have determined important political actors to re-view own policies accordingly to their national interests, at the same time, shattering the liberal world order.

The present world took a different starting turn with the Crimea annexation by Russia in 2014, followed by the on-going war in Eastern Ukraine. A strong message of Russia reasserting itself as a global power led to a further political confrontation with Western allies. As a result, there is a new force transforming the international relations system. In addition, the EU and US's economic sanctions imposed on Russia at first sight, gave a leverage to undermine the Russian influence in the region. The immediate consequences were Russian increasing economic burden and a political isolation at the foremost high-level forums. Although, those punishment mechanisms towards Russia had failed when European leaders have reset their cooperation with Kremlin by defending own national interests. The statement of the Hungarian Prime-minister is a confirmation of that: "If the Russian gas comes only through Ukraine, that is not good for Hungary. We do not like to depend on any one transit country."¹

On the other hand, the international community is used to a US that is always taking the lead whenever major issues are emerging in terms of security, economy and finance, endorsing good governance and democracy, being a sound global power wherever in the world. Throughout the Trump administration, the US's role changed by giving a clear message to its traditional allies that it's time to put "America First", affirming that the future belongs to "patriots" over "globalists"². The Trump's political approach lead to a number of unprecedented decisions: the US' withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Agreement, from the important UN specialized institutions like UNESCO, Human Rights Council, also, leaving the Paris Agreement, or engaging in a war trade with China. In addition, the sound case with the US drone strike in Iran³ have drawn diverse

¹ Orban Defends Hungary's Good Relations With Russia, RFE/RL, 30 October 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-to-visit-eu-nation-hungary-as-russian-presence-grows/30243531.html>

² Madeleine Carisle, „Trump Defends 'America First' Policy in U.N. Speech, Says the Future Belongs to 'Patriots' Over 'Globalists'”, Time, 24 September 2019, <https://time.com/5684890/trump-un-address-america-first/>

³ US kills Iran general Qassem Suleimani in strike ordered by Trump, The Guardian, January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/03/baghdad-airport-iraq-attack-deaths-iran-us-tensions>

reactions and high concerns among the European political actors as regards possible tension escalation in the Middle East and beyond.

It's obvious that currently relying on the US support is under the question. However, it had a heavy impact on the foremost European countries and on the EU itself, determining them to rethink their foreign and security policies without counting on someone's external support.

The future of the European Union, while struggling with an institutional crisis of its own, is putting on the risk the EU as a resilient political power. The main triggers of the current situation inside the EU are the lack of a common vision on foreign and security issues, as a Carnegie's researcher revealed a tough statement about it: "In urgent crises, when every hour counts, the EU is simply not a credible actor."¹ The EU's high dependence on the US security protection is a serious concern, which requires proper measures.

On the other hand, the French President Emmanuel Macron warned that European countries can no longer rely on US to defend NATO allies, by sustaining a scandalous statement that the political-military block is becoming "brain-dead".²

Along with these divergences: the refugee crisis, lack of consensus on EU enlargement, on relationships with Russia, BREXIT and its consequences, the uncertain partnership with US, in addition, having a China's rise as global economic power, make the EU more vulnerable. These challenges undermine the EU as a model of resilient and sustainable actor, subsequently directly affecting countries from its close neighborhood. At the same time, these challenges can be considered as a new phase of the EU transformation if its leaders take the advantage of it in order to strengthen the EU resources and institutional capacities.

In the meantime, the recent outbreak pandemic disease COVID-19, affected almost every country in the world at all levels, led to the countries' temporary self-isolation and the determination to prioritize the national needs and interests in order to save the their own social-economic welfare. The long term impact of the pandemic depends on the extent in which the international community will be able to unite its efforts to tackle the social-economic, political and military issues.

¹ Stefan Lehne, „How the EU Can Survive in a Geopolitical Age”, Carnegie Europe, February 25, 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/02/25/how-eu-can-survive-in-geopolitical-age-pub-81132>

² Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead, The Economist, 7 November 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

In the end, either there is a credibility crisis between leading countries or a new phase is on the way to be established within a new international relations order. However, the geopolitical tendencies impacted on those countries in the process of assimilating the Euro-Atlantic values and principles, while Moldova is getting through a stagnation on its Europeanisation path.

The Moldova's (i)reversible Europeanization vector

The Moldovan former leadership under the Democratic Party left many discrepancies within the state's domestic and foreign affairs. Therefore, in 2018 Moldova was described as “a state captured by oligarchic interests.”¹ Such an ascertainment stated by the EU has been the toughest so far, emphasizing a high level of regression of democracy and rule of law. Nevertheless, the fragile coalition created between the political bloc ACUM² and Socialists Party undertook the leadership in June 2019, when Moldova was on the brink of a grave political, constitutional and economic crisis.

The new established government led by Maia Sandu gave hopes to many of the Moldovan citizens including to its foreign partners for a new phase of country's development. Hereafter, it has resumed to the proper implementation of reform agenda based on the EU-Moldova Association Agreement. In particular, the reforms on electoral system, judiciary and prosecution service, bank and finance sector, the fight against corruption, freedom of expression and independent mass-media, also increasing the civil society's participation in the decision-making process. It is noteworthy that due to the Sandu Government's firm commitment to endorse the ambitious reform agenda it was resumed the dialogue with the main Moldova's development partners, namely with the EU and its member states. As a result, Moldova received the first disbursed tranche of 30 million Euro from the EU macro-financial assistance program of 100 million Euro total³. The received financial assistance aims at supporting to continue reforms in strategic areas.

¹Petras Auštrevičius, Reporteur on Moldova, ”Report on the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Moldova (2017/2281 (INI))”, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Parliament of the European Union, 15 October 2018, Brussels

² ACUM was a political block created in 2019, by the Party of Action and Solidarity lead by Maia Sandu and Dignity and Truth Platform Party lead by Andrei Nastase, aiming of joint participation in the 2019 Moldovan parliamentary elections.

³ The EU has provided the Republic of Moldova with 30 million euros in macro-financial assistance, Cotidianul, 9 November 2019, <https://cotidianul.md/2019/11/09/ue-a-acordat-republicii-moldova-30-de-milioane-de-euro-in-calitate-de-asistenta-macrofinanciara/>

The political willingness to pursuing the reform agenda and strengthening a democratic and modernized country was shattered again. On November 14, 2019, the Maia Sandu Government was ousted after a no-confidence vote in Parliament.¹ An expected political movement on behalf of the Socialist Party and *de facto* their leader, President Igor Dodon. As a result, the new “technocrat” government lead by the Ion Chicu was approved by the Moldovan MPs two days after of dissolution of the previous one. In both cases, Democratic Party expressed in favor by supporting those decisions. Nevertheless, the proper reform process is put on hold by the current decision makers, and the relationship with the European Union have been visibly affected since the Chicu Government took leadership.

In this context, there can be underlined several main triggers undermining the irreversibility of the Europeanisation development of Moldova:

- **Lost momentum related to Moldova’s progress on the EU Association Agreement implementation.** The self-declaring “pro-European” Moldovan political parties have compromised themselves in relation to the EU and its member states. Lack of transparency and stagnation in the billion-dollar theft investigation, high level of corruption at all levels, a number of media outlets controlled by small group of interests affiliated to the political leaders, hindering the activity of civil society organizations etc., represents just few major issues backsliding the Moldova transformation and modernization course.

- **A pro-Russian elected president in 2016, Igor Dodon,** created the premises for resumption of Russia’s influence in Moldova, regardless to build a mutual benefit partnership. The controversial Russian credit of 200 million Euro, declared unconstitutional and contrary to the interests of Moldova by the Constitutional Court² is a prove of that.

- **Lack of proper political dialogue at top level between Moldova and its neighbors – Romania,** a perpetual advocate of Moldova’ European integration vector and the main trade partner, **and Ukraine,** an important partner sharing common European aspirations and challenges.

- **A failed “balanced foreign policy”** assertively promoted by the President Dodon and the Chicu Government. According to its author President Dodon, the balanced foreign policy initiative stands for developing pragmatic and good relations with the West as well with Eastern partners.

¹ Moldovan Government Collapses; EU Calls Development ‘Worrying’, RFE/ RL’s Moldovan Service, 12 November 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldovan-parliament-to-consider-confidence-vote-in-sandu-s-cabinet/30265748.html>

² Decision for the control of constitutionality, Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova, 7 May 2020, <http://www.constcourt.md/ccdocview.php?tip=hotariri&docid=733&l=ro>

This approach naturally raised critics and concerns among many political and civic opponents of the current Moldavian decision makers. Arguing that this foreign policy course draws toward a Moldavian passive cooperation and engagement, in particular with Western partners, unlike with Russia and CIS countries, and moreover, has no credibility and significant results.

- **Lack of substantial reforms** in accordance to the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, as there are no proper achievements concerning the justice reform, fight against corruption, or the bank theft investigation. Notwithstanding, the Prosecutor General Alexander Stoianoglo during a press conference¹ declared that Vladimir Plohotniuc is one of the main beneficiaries of the bank theft. Subsequently, the Moldovan judge issued an arrest warrant on V. Plahotniuc. However, the difficult work is just coming, but it is crucial to have a fully transparent investigation and prosecution processes, and the most important money recovery so needed, especially, during a pandemic crisis.

- **Promoting the narrow interests of a small political group** explains the real concern of the disbursing the second tranche of 30 million Euro from the EU macro-financial assistance. The main dispute on this issue between the Parliamentary opposition and the Socialists, backed up by the President Dodon and the Prime-minister Chicu, is the draft law regulating the civil society organizations activity. The law, one of the EU conditionalities, is considered by Dodon and Chicu allegedly a threat to the Moldova's independence.² In fact, the law aims at preventing political parties finance on behalf of the NGOs or charity foundations usually affiliated to political parties, which might affect the Socialists party during the forthcoming presidential elections. On the other hand, the European Parliament rapporteur for Moldova, Dragoș Tudorache³ warned the Moldovan leadership about the upcoming deadline (June 2020) of voting those adopted laws as pre-conditions of accessing the second tranche, stating that beyond the electoral purpose there is no explanation for that political resistance.

¹ Press briefing by General Prosecution of the Republic of Moldova, 18 May, 2020, video, Privesc.eu, https://www.privesc.eu/arhiva/90878/Briefing-de-pres-a-sustinut-de-Procuratura-General-?utm_source=partner&utm_medium=widget&utm_term=live_90878&utm_campaign=redirect

² Chicu about the law regulating the NGOs activity, Newsmaker, 1 June 2020, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/chicu-despre-legea-privind-activitatea-ong-urilor-ceea-ce-fac-unii-exponenti-ai-opozitiei-este-o-incercare-de-a-lichida-republica-moldova/>

³ Dragoș Tudorache: The non-voting of the EU conditionalities will deprive the Republic of Moldova of 30 million euros, Radio Chisinau, 3 June 2020, <https://radiochisinau.md/nevotarea-conditionalitatilor-ue-va-lipsi-rmoldova-de-30-de-mln-de-euro---110188.html>

- **Using the pandemic crisis for narrow political purposes** by the current decision makers, namely, by the President Igor Dodon who seems to be already engaged in an unofficial electoral campaign, strengthening its positions for the upcoming presidential elections planned for the 1st of November 2020. In this regard, he is carrying out a number of visits to families with children and elders, obstructing any protection measures¹, endangering those people and increasing the burden on the Moldovan exhausted system medical healthcare. On the other hand, every foreign aid from the Moldova's partners received in this tough time is more than greeted by the Moldovan citizens. However, President Dodon and his supporters greatly politicized the foreign assistance during the pandemic by praising the Russian, Chinese and Turkish support, at the same time undermining in particular the Romanian and the EU support in fighting the COVID-19. Suggesting that EU is coming with "beautiful declarations" for the Eastern Partnership countries,² stirring up critics from the political opposition and civil society, determining the EU Head of Delegation to declare his regret that EU is put in such a bad light.

Instead of conclusion

It has to be acknowledged that the nowadays world is facing an ongoing transformative process shaped by a number of challenges and threats. Subsequently, it determined the key political actors to accordingly undertake measures of response, making the national interests a priority again by reviewing old principles of collective cooperation. However, the recent outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic crisis can also be a driving determinant toward a future international relations system. It's obvious that less developed countries like Moldova will be more affected, facing a number of challenges if the decision makers are not properly engaged in strengthening the democracy and rule of law.

The above-mentioned triggers might affect the European vector of Moldova's development including its further cooperation with traditional foreign partners. Given the ongoing pandemic crisis that will leave a strong impact on the future of the international relationships, the Moldovan leadership has to review its policies in order to protect its citizens, but not political dividing them.

¹ Stela Untila, „Recommended but not mandatory”, Newsmaker, 15 May 2020, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/recomandabil-dar-nu-obligatoriu-de-ce-seful-statului-nu-poata-masca-in-timpul-vizitelor-in-teritoriu-chiar-si-atunci-cand-merge-acasa-la-veterani/>

² Stela Untila, „Dodon listed the countries that provided Moldova with 'real' support”, Newsmaker, 10 April 2020, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/am-auzit-declaratii-ca-sunt-gata-sa-ne-ajute-si-cei-din-ue-dodon-a-enumerat-tarile-care-au-oferit-ajutor-real-moldovei/>

Achieving Moldova's democratization depends to a great extent on the quality of the ongoing transformations and reforms, as well as the imminent strategic response to the COVID-19 consequences, to prevent a harsh long term economic and social crisis. One of the possible scenarios involving the current decision makers regarding the furthering of the European vector of Moldova will be framed in a slow process of the EU-Association agenda implementation, without measurable results in strategic areas.

Another one involves the results of the November presidential elections and the possibility to conduct early Parliamentary elections. That might be an opportunity for those in opposition to unify efforts and take on the leadership. However, this is a real struggle during the current political situation, while the opposition parties are facing disagreements instead of agreements.

Although, the opposition' winning the elections and being strong committed to pursue the European reform agenda in order to overcome the political and economic crisis in a challenging and unpredictable period of time, it would create favorable premises to deepen the cooperation with the EU and its member states. But in this case, it is much needed a reliable leadership which Moldova failed, unfortunately, several times along its history of relations with the EU.

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