

DEVELOPMENT OF INTEGRATIONIST POTENTIAL IN EAP STATES IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY – THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, UKRAINE AND GEORGIA

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Abstract

In the article is studied the relationship of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia with European Union, the current situation of these states within Eastern Partnership and European Neighborhood Policy. Authors, also, underline the necessity of consolidation of both, bilateral and multilateral cooperation among partner states, as well as the improvement of existing individual and common working mechanisms on the advancement of European integration process of countries. In this context, is underlined the importance of newly signed memorandum of understanding on establishing cooperation on European integration by the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. This memorandum reflects the necessity for the three states to have a more ambitious approach of European integration as well as a necessity of a rethinking of Eastern Partnership framework in general.

Keywords: Eastern Partnership, European Neighborhood Policy, integrationist potential, memorandum of understanding, Association Trio

Introduction

Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), in particular through the launch and implementation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) project, represents a special interest for research, as its main objective is the strengthening of the political association and economic integration of six Eastern European and South Caucasus partner states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Through this policy, the European Union actively collaborates with its eastern neighbors in order to achieve a high

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level of political association and a high degree of economic integration. The Eastern Partnership program was conceived by the EU as an effective platform for collaboration between EU and its partner states, as well as among the partner states themselves. Thus, through its policies, programs, including the neighborhood ones, as the Eastern Partnership is, it has offered to the partner states different opportunities, certainly under some conditions, criteria and requirements. To what extent these opportunities were used, how they were capitalized have depended only on the Eastern Partnership participating states, on their capacity, the political will of governments and the mobilization of efforts to make the most of the offered possibilities.

Since its launch in 2009 (12 years ago) some results have been achieved in the process of implementing the provisions of the Eastern Partnership program: in the field of developing trade and economic relations with EU, in the field of environment and of communications, in the field of governance, democratic development, legal standards, support for civil society and social development. Also, the level of cooperation between the European Union and partner states has increased, as has increased the collaboration among the participating states in both bilateral and multilateral formats. At the same time, it is clear that the integrationist potential of the Eastern Partnership framework has not been exploited to the extent of the opportunities offered, and there are a range of unutilized supplies.

Thus, in the article, we will briefly analyze the current situation of European integration process of the three most advanced Eastern Partnership states, which have signed Association Agreements with the European Union - Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. In this context, will be examined the data offered by the EU reports on countries' progress as well as opinions of national and international experts in domain. The study applies interdisciplinary approach and qualitative research methodology. This enables us to highlight both main achievements and existing problems within Eastern partnership framework. Further, the analysis shows that there are some patterns specific to the development of the integrationist potential of the researched states within European Neighborhood Policy in general and Eastern Partnership in particular. One general trend characteristic to Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine reflects that all three countries, in their foreign policies, try to use all available opportunities offered by their partnership with European Union. Following this objective, the states develop necessary reforms according to EU conditionality, in order to strengthen their democratic institutions and to adjust their national legislation to EU key norms and standards. As well, all three states agree and are fully convinced that EU membership prospect is the main incentive for further deeper reforms. Lastly, a certain obstacle in the process of implementation of Association Agreements signed with the European Union is considered to be domestic political and economic problems the trio copes with. Taking into consideration existing similarities, common desire to advance in the relationship with the European Union and certain progress within Eastern Partnership, these states should move forward. Thus, the recent initiative of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to



define common objectives and mechanisms of cooperation within Eastern Partnership is an expected one and should be developed as much as possible in order to consolidate the political dialogue among partner states and fortify the integrationist process with European Union.

Conclusively, we will come up with some suggestions regarding the development of the integrationist potential of the Eastern Partnership framework in the political, economic and social areas, as well as regarding the collaboration between the three partner states and their joint integration efforts.

1. Potential of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia in the Context of Eastern Partnership

Eastern Partnership is the framework that has regulated the cooperation between the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and EU since 2009 and represents an important evolution in this process, even if it does not confer the prospect of EU membership. This significance comes from the fact that the main aspects of Eastern Partnership are based on the internal dimension of the European process, and namely on the promotion of the political, economic, social and cultural transformations through the adoption of European norms and values. After 12 years from foundation of the EaP framework, within these three countries are registered some visible and tangible results. A milestone in this regard was the signing of the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014 including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). In addition, at the EaP Summit in Brussels in 2017, the EU came up with the working plan for the “20 Deliverables for 2020”. According to the document, “a close link between the “20 Deliverables for 2020” document and the overall European Neighborhood Policy is ensured, as well as with relations between the EU and the Eastern Partners, in particular contractual relations and the Association Agendas and Partnership Priorities. The close linkage between EU assistance and national reform plans will also aim to enhance the efficiency of support and encourage partner countries to undertake reforms.” (Eastern Partnership -20 Deliverables for 2020, 2017) Thus, the deliverables are grouped in four key priority areas of 1) economic development and market opportunities, 2) strengthening institutions and good governance, 3) connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change, and 4) mobility and people-to-people contacts (Eastern Partnership -20 Deliverables for 2020, 2017). These established priorities show the effort of the EU to create a concrete vision for the countries of the EaP, which are very general and not rewarded properly, in the sense that if a country receives a candidate status, it will definitely achieve more. We briefly will focus on each country in order to estimate the development of their activity on European integration process in the context of Eastern Partnership, and then will trace a view on their common opportunities to advance in this framework.



1.1. Georgia

Georgian government has declared the European integration process as one of the most important objectives of its foreign policy. Hence, cooperation with the European Union is a priority and Georgia is trying to show its commitment to the cooperation. Georgian government is aware that the European Union would mean a huge modernization for the country and development in such fields as domestic politics, human rights protection, social mobility and environmental protection. In this way, the government is promoting an informational campaign which spreads the idea that being closer to the European Union, or in the best case, joining the Union, would mean a great development for the country and would stand for its Europeanization and total modernization. Indeed, through the framework of the main agreements with European Union (Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, Action Plan Georgia-EU, Eastern Partnership, Mobility Partnership, Association Agreement), Georgia had realized important domestic changes dealing with economic development, poverty reduction, energy sector, agriculture, human rights etc. (Troitino, 2012, p.92) According to facts and figures about EU-Georgia relations presented in 2021, through achievements of Georgia within Eastern Partnership, one of the most tangible is that EU is Georgia's main trading partner, with a 27% share of its total trade. Also, the role of EU is strongly felt as the ongoing opening of the EU market to more Georgian products continually offers Georgians new export and income opportunities. Moreover, through its ENPARD program, the EU is modernizing Georgian agriculture by supporting the rollout of the agriculture cooperative model, leading to the establishment of 1,200 cooperatives in Georgia. Another important fact is that through Local Action Groups, the EU has supported over 500 local development initiatives in rural areas and, in order to ensure equal access to justice for all citizens regardless of their income, the EU has supported the establishment of the State Legal Aid Service. Further, as is indicated in the document, EU has trained over 5,000 judges, prosecutors, prison and probation staff, police investigators, public defenders, and lawyers to increase their skills and efficiency and further protect Georgians' rights. On the other hand, the EU has supported the establishment of 76 Government Community Centers in smaller towns and villages across the country in order to facilitate access to Government services. All these actions highly have contributed to the transformation of judicial and administrative sectors of the country. Another tangible result within Eastern Partnership is that since the entry into force of visa liberalization for Georgians on 28 March 2017, more than 500,000 Georgian citizens have travelled to the EU without a visa on a total of over 1 million trips. It is also worth to mention that since 2018 Georgia hosts the European School in Tbilisi, bringing together students from across the Eastern Partnership region, who receives a high quality education inspired by European and international teaching standards etc. (Facts and figures about EU-Georgia relations, 2021). The last achievement has a special significance, as education in European Studies is a priority not only for the Georgia, but for the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine as



well. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia has received full support from the EU. The EU Association Implementation Report on Georgia of 2021 estimates that as part of the “Team Europe” approach, the EU has reprogrammed EUR 183 million of grants to support Georgia. Besides, the EU allocated an exceptional Macro Financial Assistance program of EUR 150 million, already partially disbursed in 2020. Part of the 2019 bilateral allocation (EUR 127 million) and of the 2020 bilateral allocation (EUR 102.7 million) have been reprogrammed to better support the country’s COVID-19 response in three main areas: socio-economic recovery, health sector, and the most vulnerable population. (Association Implementation Report on Georgia, 2021)

Despite COVID-19, Georgia has remained committed to the implementation, obligations and undertakings of the Association Agreement. According to Association Implementation Report on Georgia of 2021, alignment to the EU *acquis* as well as to European standards in the area of human rights has broadly continued. However, in the report is underlined that Georgia still has to improve the situation in such fields as the independence of the judiciary system, rule of law, mass -media and to make more efforts for further democratic consolidation. Other important steps that should be undertaken by Georgian government at the moment are those to ensure an inclusive, green and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and to make further progress on digitalization and digital literacy. Also, the Report notes that structural reforms remain crucial as they make Georgia’s economy less vulnerable to external developments, notably COVID-19, and enhance the investment climate and trade potential (Association Implementation Report on Georgia, 2021). EU recommendations for Georgia clearly show that, even if the country has registered some important progress in eradication of corruption, improved business sector and developed a range of political and economic reforms in accordance with European requirements, still it have to undertake more actions in order to comply with European standards.

1.2. Ukraine

As Georgia and Moldova, Ukraine also follows the European course and has registered steady progress within European Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership. Analyzing the works of Ukrainian scholars, it becomes clear that European integration was traditionally one of the most intense segments of Ukraine’s foreign policy. Similarly to other Eastern Partnership participating states, Ukrainian government is focused on the implementation of the Association Agreement and other commitments. In the difficult conditions of domestic problems, security issues and external factors this process normally meets some obstacles. As Ukrainian researchers argue, Ukraine is highly active with sector-based convergence with EU standards in selected sectors. On the other hand, it is noted that despite the authorities’ efforts to maintain the set course and pace, the COVID-19 pandemic has played its role. In this way, conforming to the “Pulse of



the Agreement” system for monitoring progress under the Association Agreement implementation action plan, in 2020, Ukraine delivered on only 30% of its commitments, which is considered to be the lowest indicator in all the years of the Association Agreement implementation (Ukrainian Prism, 2021, p. 71). Analytical study realized by the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”, also, underlines that the government and parliament agreed on legislative priorities regarding European integration, including 30 bills on energy, transport, trade, the Green Deal, etc., and the launch of the EU Days in the Verkhovna Rada when only bills on European integration get considered (Ukrainian Prism, 2021, p. 72). At its turn, The European Union fully supports reforms in Ukraine. It also supports the country’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, threatened by Russia’s ongoing hybrid war against the country, which has included the illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the war in eastern Ukraine and disinformation activities. This support is very important for the country and its population. According to EU Parliament report on the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine, since 2014, European Union and European financial institutions has offered to Ukraine grants and loans to support reform processes in volume more than €16.5 billion (EU Parliament, 2021). This financial support was given under the strong conditionality in terms of continued reform progress. An important part of this amount includes EU support to Ukraine of over €202 million for immediate and short-term needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as €1.2 billion in the form of macro financial assistance to support mitigation of the economic and social consequences of the pandemic (EPRS, 2021).

If we refer to main outcomes of EU-Ukraine cooperation, there can be mentioned that in the area of justice, rule of law and the fight against corruption, Ukraine’s institutional framework now includes the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC), which began working on high-level corruption cases (Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, 2020). In general, as it is provided by the facts and figures about EU- Ukraine relations presented in 2021, European Union has organized large-scale support to Ukraine’s governance reform through such programs as: anti-corruption (EUACI), the rule of law (PRAVO), public administration reform (EU4PAR), public finance management (EU4PFM), and decentralization (U-LEAD with Europe) (Facts and figures about EU-Ukraine relations, 2021). All these measures are designed to country’s modernization and democratic consolidation. Association Implementation Report on Ukraine released in 2020, notes that in the area of public administration reform, a series of institutional reorganizations and civil service law changes led to the replacement of more than a third of top management posts in Ukrainian ministries and agencies. Also, some good reform progress was achieved in the domains of agrarian and rural development policy, as well as in the domain of digital transformation, where the progress was possible due to the launching mobile application for digital public services. Another outcome is related to visa liberalization that has allowed Ukrainians to make more than 50 million visits to EU Member States and the



Schengen area during this time (Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, 2020). On the economic dimension, DCFTA implementation has registered a continuous increase of bilateral trade between the EU and Ukraine since its provisional application. It has reached €43.3 billion in 2019. As a result, 40% of Ukraine's trade is now with the EU and that makes EU Ukraine's number one trading partner (Facts and figures about EU-Ukraine relations, 2021).

However, there are some moments that still require improvement. In this context, the Association Implementation Report on Ukraine of 2020 underlines that country should seek to minimize the negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis and overcome the resulting economic challenges with the support of its international partners. It is considered that in this way will be ensured the maintenance of Ukraine's strategic orientation, as enshrined in its Constitution and set out in the Association Agreement, towards closer ties with the European Union. Next, in the report is indicated a range of sectors which require further concerted efforts. These sectors include energy, corporate governance of state owned enterprises along with further critical reforms in the area of judiciary reform and the rule of law more broadly, where Ukraine's citizens can be expected to continue their demand for progress (Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, 2020). Thus, as Ukrainian researchers generalize, while continuing the European integration process, the current Ukrainian government tried to focus its efforts on deepening and developing partnerships with the European Union and on implementing the objectives and assignments set out in the Association Agreement. At the same time, Ukraine's movement towards the EU is hampered by some dangerous domestic and external factors, including issues with inadequate public administration, the fight against corruption, domestic political conflicts, imperfect European integration policy and many others. Meantime, external negative factors include both Russia's ongoing hybrid aggression and different degree crisis and problems within the EU (Ukraine's sectoral integration into the EU, 2020, p. 14).

1.3. Republic of Moldova

Eastern Partnership has provided for Moldova, as well as for other EaP countries, a modernization and reform guidance according to EU values and principles. Within it, all governmental actions are focused on development of key reforms, on economic development, on governance and cooperation in such domains as energy, transport, social protection, education, environment etc. In order to implement the Association Agreement was adopted National Action Plan for implementation of the Association Agreement, initially for 2014-2016, then it was extended to 2019. As result, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova announced a realization rate of around 72 %. No doubt, Moldova has registered some good outcomes within Eastern Partnership. The latest data presented by facts and figures about EU-Moldova relations in 2021 shows that since 2019, the EU has been supporting a €10.6 million



program to contribute to the prevention and fight against corruption greatly through increasing the level of citizens' participation in decision-making process. An important part of EU assistance is designed to strengthen democratic standards, the rule of law and efforts to end high-level corruption in Moldova. Also, the EU continues actively to support civil society in Moldova, including by creating links between civil society organizations on both banks of the Nistru River, through its confidence building measures (Facts and figures about EU-Moldova relations, 2021). It is also worth to mention that due to the implementation of DCFTA, EU has become Moldova's largest trading partner and biggest investor in the country. In 2020, it accounted for 66.4% of its total exports and 52% of its total trade (Facts and figures about EU-Moldova relations, 2021). At the same time, the realization rate of Association Agreement is not really high after seven years of work. In this context, alternative national reports, elaborated by civil society, argue, the process of implementation of the Association Agreement has been hampered and affected by the lack of a new national planning document for the year 2020, as well as by the COVID-19. The pandemic conditions certainly impacted the efficiency of the coordination and enforcement process of legislative and implementing measures planned for 2020-2021. The report further underlines that democratic institutions remain fragile and continue to be affected by narrow political and economic interests. National experts find insufficient progress in the area of justice, freedom and security. It is stated that the activity of the General Prosecutor's Office did not provide the expected results on investigating the cases related to the Bank Fraud. The Parliament adopted new regulations on the application of sanctions for money laundering and a draft strategic planning document in this area was drawn up for the next five years. Also, public administration reform did not make significant progress (Groza, 2020). Unfortunately, in case of the Republic of Moldova is observed a kind of paradox. The reform process is continuous, but the expected results are not achieved. Since the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with European Union, Moldova constantly has arrears in same domains: justice, fight against corruption, state of law, public administration etc. EU comes with different mechanisms within its neighborhood policy, provide assistance and know how, including a certain roadmap for further actions. Nonetheless, the progress is slow. In this context, according to Iulian Groza, the political situation in Moldova in recent years and the state of its relations with the EU demonstrate that more creative and forward looking ideas are needed. Basically, the essential thrust of any new proposals for the future of the EU's EaP policy should be to prevent further backsliding in Moldova by continuing to apply EU conditionality, as it now seems clear that the EU's strict conditionality worked in Moldova (Groza, 2019, p. 53).



2. Discussion

Indeed, EU conditionality, both positive and negative, is the best tool of European community to maintain the dynamic of reform process not only in Moldova, but in other EaP countries as well. Of course, it means that promoted conditionality policy has credibility in the countries where it is applied. The same credibility should have the EaP countries for the European Union too. Hence the main task of the Republic of Moldova is to work on the implementation of domestic transformation. With the establishment of a pro-European government, the Republic of Moldova now should clearly establish its priorities and goals and develop its integrationist potential. As the country does not have a national strategy of European integration, the successful implementation of the Association Agreement should become the one. Accomplishment of this goal will not only contribute to the Europeanization and modernization of the country, but also will provide the necessary basis for a more ambitious format of cooperation with European Union in future. Implementation of the Association Agreement is a complex and multidimensional process. It implies not just government development of reform process. It requires several interconnected activities. Firstly, it is necessary strong motivation and determination to float the necessary reforms into the practice and make them really work. Next, there is a need to improve the partnership between the government and civil society by involving the last one's expertise in the process of negotiation and implementation of European integration process' tasks. Another important dimension would be the promotion of a very good informational campaign that will disseminate and explain the implemented measures. That will help to form a correct public opinion and to obtain necessary support for further actions, especially for those unpopular.

Thus, all three countries have made progress within Eastern Partnership, especially in comparison with other participating states. Also, the trio has realized that is time to manifest more ambitious approach in their relationship with European Union. Till present, all three states basically related on the EU guidance within European Neighborhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, as well as in the process of reform implementation under the assumed commitments. In this way it has become obvious the need of some individual actions that will convince the European community that the trio has the capacity to transform, develop and implement European norms and values in order to become more attractive for the Union. Moreover, a more pragmatic and ambitious approach to the development of their integrationist potential will contribute to the confidence that European integration process is indeed a priority of their foreign and domestic policies. In this context, it is worth to mention the foundation of Association Trio, realized when foreign affairs ministers of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have signed a memorandum of understanding on establishing cooperation on European integration in Kyiv on May 17, 2021. The primary goal of the new alliance is to make a concerted move toward European integration. Also, as it is being



highlighted in mass-media, the Association Trio represents a mere reaction to recent regional developments rather than fixing the strategic flaws. Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Dmytro Kuleba's statement reflects that reality: "Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are convinced that the Eastern Partnership needs a strategic renewal." (Rahimov, 2021) Thus, the signed memorandum sets out a series of objectives for the cooperation of the countries associated with the European Union and provides the normative basis for undertaking joint diplomatic steps, trilateral consultations and public communication actions. After the signing of the Memorandum, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova Aureliu Ciocoi stated: "Let me emphasize that our cooperation in this format started some time ago. We have signed joint statements, joint letters and joint position papers on various issues related to the Eastern Partnership. Therefore, this memorandum is a logical continuation and aims to simplify our trilateral dialogue and diplomatic efforts... Last but not the least, let me say that in order to achieve our ultimate goal of joining the European Union, we must join forces and act together. My dear friends, let's work and hope that we will achieve this goal in the next decade, not in decades." (Stratan, 2021) Hence, it is important, to undertake joint energetic actions so that those outlined would be put into practice.

Generally, this initiative was expected, as Eastern Partnership framework evolved and have showed that from EU is needed a new position towards its participating states, according to their commitments and outcomes. Along these lines, Moldovan researchers have come previously with a set of recommendations in this regard presented in one of papers released by the Institute of European Policies and Reforms. Through these recommendations, Moldovan experts noted: firstly, EU should reconfirm its clear acknowledgement of the European aspirations of the three associated Eastern Partnership countries; secondly, the associated Eastern Partnership partners should be invited to selected meetings of the EU Council and EU working parties; thirdly there is a need to consolidate the existing Eastern Partnership achievements and aim at full implementation of the Association Agreements and comprehensive integration of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine into the EU's Single Market based on the four freedoms; and finally, there is a need to take the Eastern Partnership into policy areas which it covered less so far, but which are absolutely key to the future of the Eastern Partnership states in areas such as security and the environment (IPRE, 2020).

Thus, foundation of the Association Trio was received warmly by the signatory states as well as by European Union. With this new alliance Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia reaffirmed their commitment to the common values on which the European Union is based on, as well as their commitment to comprehensive reforms and harmonization of legislation and assured of their full support to the strengthening of Eastern Partnership as a tool of promotion of peace and prosperity in the region. At the same time, the trio shows its readiness to participate in other complementary European initiatives. For the first time, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia speak about the fact that countries are European and can ask for the EU membership according to EU criteria. This statement of the Association Trio was



heard by European structures as well and will require lately an answer. In the meantime, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia should work on their integrationist potential and commitments.

Conclusions

The experience of the whole period since the launch of the EU Eastern Partnership program shows that it was a correct decision to initiate this policy. However, despite some progress, in the development of integration process of the three states there are some common and specific to each country problems. For these reasons we can discuss certain issues following the scenario of a differentiated approach towards the Eastern Partnership states.

As it was stated above, the EU membership prospect is the main incentive for further deeper reforms in the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. This incentive, today, is the catalyzer of all government actions and implementation process of Association Agreements signed with the European Union. Due to political changes within the countries and consolidation of European orientation, we can argue that all three states are oriented to full transformation in accordance with European values and there will be no deviation from this course. At the same time, we can notice that main difficulties in the way of development of integrationist potential of these states are domestic ones, as the countries receive necessary assistance and support from the European Union for reform and different projects development. In this way, further advancement in the relationship with the European Union mostly depends on the governments of these states.

In the case of the Republic of Moldova, in order to develop the integrationist potential of the European Neighborhood Policy within Eastern Partnership framework is necessary to restore the confidence of the European institutions and restore the confidence of citizens in the European perspective of the country. Both, unfortunately, were lost for several reasons, the main one being the so-called „Moldovan policy of European integration”, that in our country permanently, even during the so-called alliances for European integration, was a duplicitous, speculative and demagogic one, as it was argued in a publication of 2004 (Vasilescu, 2004). In terms of relations of the Republic of Moldova with the European institutions, were not used all opportunities and possibilities offered by European policies and projects, including material, financial, technical and structural support. Also, due to the policies promoted by Chisinau, particularly to political instability, high corruption and failure to meet European conditionality the trust of European partners was lost, so now it has become particularly difficult to trust the seriousness and responsibility of political government in Moldova. In terms of citizens' trust in the European perspective of the country, it is clear that as a result of promoted policies, inconsistency, political instability, demagoguery and speculation, support for the direction of European integration has been largely lost. How paradoxical it would be, but if, according to the Public Opinion Barometers



(BOP) and other polls, in the years of the Communist Party's rule the percentage of those who supported the direction of European integration reached over 70%, then in the years of government of so-called Alliances for European Integration, this percentage fell below 50 and even below 40 %. To restore the citizens' trust in the European strategic course of the Republic of Moldova is now complicated, but very important and necessary, otherwise without population's support any development plans, reforms will remain only on paper. Basically, in Ukraine and Georgia there is similar situation with citizens' support to European integration process. The majority of citizens favor the European course of their countries, but the expectations of people should be met. In this sense, it is very important and necessary to raise the level of work with the population in order to train European citizens, to increase the level of consciousness, mentality and European culture of population, without which it is, again, difficult to achieve some development policies and necessary reforms.

Generally, for a more efficient development of the European integrationist potential, it is very important to strengthen the role of civil society. This is especially necessary in the conditions of the Republic of Moldova, when we face political instability, several manifestations of political trajectory, a growing distrust of citizens in political institutions, when there is such an avalanche of parties and political demagogues. Under these conditions, civil society should assume the role of communicator and main trainer of public opinion on the European orientation of the Republic of Moldova, as well as of Ukraine and Georgia.

At the same time, there should be a stronger position and a more differentiated approach from the European Union as well. It becomes obvious that existing format of Eastern Partnership with six member states should be rethought, as Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia are forerunners and the other three countries are more hesitant in their European course. Belarus' withdrawal from the Eastern Partnership (announced by the Belarusian government in June 2021 as a reaction to imposed sanctions by EU) is another challenge for the program itself and for the European Neighborhood Policy. Thus, European Union should revise the Eastern Partnership program in order to not lose its credibility within the participating states, avoid the further deepening between the leading trio and other states, as well as to evade the isolation of Belarus. Hence, it is interesting the latest proposal of European Commission on a new agenda for Eastern partners that is focusing on recovery, resilience and reform (Press release, Brussels, 2021). It is the beginning of Eastern partnership revision and its adjustment to new realities, purposes and objectives. The new proposed agenda will be discussed at the Eastern Partnership summit planned for December 2021 and that means that in 2022 the trio can have a new format of cooperation with the European Union.

On the other hand, a more ambitious approach in relationship with European Union should have the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. The trio have registered some progress within Eastern Partnership, is working on fulfillment of EU requirements and domestic transformation. Still, these states need to do more than that. In this context, an important recommendation, which we would like to



emphasize, would be the creation of a Common Bloc of three Eastern European states - the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, following the well-known example of the Visegrad Group, or V-4 – a cooperation organization founded in 1991 by four Central European states, namely the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, within which the member states ensured mutual support for political and economic integration in the European Union. It is very important to note that the V-4 organization was set up even before the participating states began EU accession negotiations, thus laying the foundations for closer regional cooperation between the signatory states, including the important field of collective security. It seems that first steps in this direction were made, taking into account that, as we have underlined above, after a series of declarations, finally, the Foreign Ministers of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have signed in Kiev, on May 17, 2021 a Memorandum on cooperation in the field of European integration, which could be considered a good start for the foundation of the Common Block of the three signatory states. It may follow the sample of the Visegrad Group or embrace an institutionalized form, what is important that it should be a really working one. The memorandum of understanding is the basis of cooperation between the countries; the Common Block would become a strong mechanism of elaboration and implementation of clear objectives and strategies within European integration process of states.

Another very important argument why closer cooperation between the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine is required is the external factor. Besides the three countries are ex-socialist and ex-Soviet states, the trio has similar problems in relation to Russia. In particular, these problems refer to frozen territorial conflicts within these states, conflicts created and supported directly by Russia. Hence, there is a need to unify the efforts of these states in order to promote a common policy towards Russia, to resolve existing conflict issues and especially to convince the great neighbor not to oppose to their choice of European integration and future EU membership. So, as we argued in one of the previous publications, we must work together with Russia, we must not exclude it, but cooperate with it where it is necessary and possible, both bilaterally and in a common trilateral format (Vasilescu, 2016). History and experience have shown that without Russia many problems cannot be solved, and building a peaceful and prosperous Europe is one of them.

Finally, one more aspect to be mentioned is that the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia are neighbors of the European Union and are respectively included in the European Neighborhood Policy. But we are not just neighbors of Europe! We are Europe itself! We have the European perspective, the perspective of being part of the great common European family. This fact must be recognized by the European institutions as well. Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia must jointly insist on this recognition. Also, the trio must do their best to get closer to the united Europe, to return to Europe, to bring back and implement at home the European values and principles.



Acknowledgement: This research has been conducted within the Project 2017-2625 ‘European Union and its Neighbourhood. Network for Enhancing EU’s Actorness in the Eastern Borderlands - ENACTED’, implemented with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. „*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*”

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