

## INTERNAL DIVISIONS AND SOCIAL COHESION - OBSTACLES IN THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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**Abstract.** *The process of integration into the European Union represents a strategic objective for many of the states in the Western Balkans, including the Republic of Moldova, regions situated at the crossroads between Europe and the former Soviet spaces. Although EU membership brings numerous economic, political, and security benefits, it also entails a series of internal challenges, some of the most significant being related to internal divisions and social cohesion—major obstacles in the accession process, as the success of integration largely depends on the internal political and social cohesion of the candidate states. In the case of the Western Balkans, ethnic, religious, and national divergences, fueled by post-communist conflicts, continue to undermine the stability of the region. In many Balkan states, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, the process of reconciliation between ethnic and national groups is incomplete, and nationalism and separatism continue to influence domestic politics and external relations. These divisions are a significant factor affecting the EU accession process for some of these countries, despite progress in certain areas. Regarding the Republic of Moldova, internal divisions are reflected in the complex context of the relations between pro-European and pro-Russian forces, fueled by the unresolved conflict in Transnistria and the historical and cultural ties with the Russian Federation. While Moldova expresses its commitment to European integration, these internal divisions complicate the reform process and the strengthening of state institutions, and public opinion remains polarized, which can affect political stability and, implicitly, the European path. Thus, both in the case of the Western Balkans states and in the case of the Republic of Moldova, social cohesion plays an essential role in ensuring a favorable climate for the reforms necessary for EU accession.*

*This article aims to highlight the impact of social division and social cohesion on the integration process of the Western Balkans states, including the Republic of Moldova, into the European integration space.*

**Keywords:** *EU integration, Thematic cluster Internal Market, The Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina Directorate for European Integration, Institutional communication, Institutional performances.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The last decades have shown that the enlargement process has been a key instrument for consolidating democracy and stability, as well as supporting economic growth in the EU's eastern and south-eastern neighbors.

Whether one thinks of the path to European integration, albeit a differentiated one, it stands also vis-à-vis many home-grown factors – internal differences and levels of cohesion which are deeply rooted in the system. Such factors may not only impede the structural change, rule of law, and successful approximation with the *acquis communautaire* that are necessary for a country wishing to one day accede (as seen in many of the criteria set out for accession) but expose how false our positive “diagnosis” is, with which too often western observers comfort themselves when contemplating life ‘over there’.

Moldova and the Western Balkans provide instructive examples of how social polarization, economic disparities, ethnic conflicts, and political fissures may cause a new member candidate to either initially or subsequently fail in taking steps toward accession. Even with EU institutional support, these societies still have low engagement in civic life and public trust in institutions, as well as the legacies of history that shape political and social realities. In this way, they influence society and act as a factor of social cohesion but also as a source of heterogeneity that is projected onto European integration.

At this moment, the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkans are trying to find their way through Europe.

## 2. THE WESTERN BALKANS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

The Western Balkans represent a variety of nations, states, languages, cultures, and religions. The term "Western Balkans" was devised by political analysts in the EU reports and carried out a policy of internal use, then later has been widely accepted for official use since its first official use by the European Union (EU) on December 8, 1998. At present, this term encompasses six states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (Liridon, 2021).

From the geographical-historical as well as from a political view, the Western Balkans are in the process of developing as a macroregion within the European context (Berisha, 2023). The region has an intense overlapping of local and regional wealth, deeply interrelated social and environmental stakes that have severed stable ground, simply shattered the area into inner disputes, and gave it "interesting but tough" features on the global spectrum. Moreover, the Western Balkan area is essential for Europe's perspective from the point of economic growth to migration and stability, energy networks, geopolitics as well as pollution decrease, climate change, and rule of law (Uvalić 2019). Geography is an influential determinant that even increases the value of politics in a small state — especially when it occupies a part which has importance militarily or geostrategically with regard to proximity to another greater power — besides population, wealth, and political orientation which could be used for stability, measuring how powerful a state can become in terms of its size. In fact, today this reality keeps the entire globe as part of a real big power competition and causes instability in the region. It is also the "crushing belt" of Europe and Asia — a bustling location where East meets West, and Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (the world's three major religions) exist side by side.

Most Balkan states are small in population, dimension, economic importance, army control, and power of the word. The conflicts it had been through during the course of them were henceforth committed to being fought again in its shadow, and they were forced to confront their mistakes — as well as a wholly arbitrary sloughing off of landmass & populace — which birthed such legacies in politics, society, and economics. On the other side, challenges in the EU's decision-making structure and costs of diverse national interests within its member states — China, Russia, and Turkey — that pushed one or another direction in relation to their strategic interest for the zone equally interrupted the European integrationist tendency in the Western Balkans (Qorraj, 2025)

By signing *Stabilization and Association Agreements with the EU*, the Western Balkan partners have opened up commerce and brought the region into compliance with EU norms. The general basis for EU ties with the Western Balkans is provided by the Stabilization and Association Agreements. We work together to tackle shared security issues. In order to foster good neighborly relations and create shared prosperity through regional integration, the EU also offers its member states financial and political help. The EU promotes regional cooperation organizations to increase economic development, improve connectivity, and improve security, among many other benefits in the region, in addition to its strong political support for the Western Balkans and the Berlin Process.

The prospect of EU membership is an incentive to promote reforms in the Western Balkans. Reforms are essential for the European path, but more importantly, they are crucial for improving political and economic governance, the rule of law, freedom of the press and conditions for civil society. This is in the common interest of the citizens of the Western Balkans and the EU. The EU accession process is at the heart of EU-Western Balkans relations. The conditions for establishing these relations were first set out in the Council Conclusions of April 1997. In 1999, the EU Council established the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP). It was confirmed that the Western Balkan countries would be eligible for EU membership if they fulfilled the criteria set out at the Copenhagen European Council in June 1993 (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, 2025). An important turning point for Europe and its unwavering commitment to expansion and unification was the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. The notion of integrating the Western Balkans into the European family was at the center of this gathering in the Greek city. The summit started the integration paths for nations coming out of a turbulent past in addition to reaffirming the EU's commitment to the enlargement agenda. However, the Western Balkans' ambitions and their integration into the European Union are still, in many respects, unmet twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit. The only nation to become a member of the EU in 2013 is Croatia. In the meanwhile, accession talks between Serbia and Montenegro didn't start until 2012.

Croatia is only the second nation to get an official EU invitation this year. Meanwhile, talks on the accession of Serbia and Montenegro started only in 2012.

On the contrary, Albania and North Macedonia are still waiting for the official start of accession negotiations, which were approved by the European Council in March 2020. Kosovo's path is nuanced due to the non-recognition of its independent state by several EU member states. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the only real perspective for the newly emerged states was integration into the European Union, as this perspective would help to adopt democratic rules and standards and to establish and consolidate the market economy. The dismemberment of Yugoslavia at the end of the 20th century conditioned the emergence of seven countries that emerged from the former

Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Slovenia, which became a member of the European Union in 2004, and Croatia, which became a member of the EU in 2013), to which Albania must be added, they are called the Western Balkans and have a total population of 5 million inhabitants.

However, fragmented among different peoples, languages, religions and cultures, these countries are very different from each other and each has its own history. The northern part of the Western Balkans (Slovenia, Croatia) lived for centuries in the orbit of Austria. The southern part remained under Ottoman rule for several centuries. With the exception of Albania, the Western Balkans were incorporated into Yugoslavia in 1920. All of them, including Albania, lived under communist rule from the end of World War II until 1990. Apart from Slovenia and Croatia, which joined the EU, each country in the Western Balkans is searching for its destiny. The only option is EU membership, which represents hope and a goal. The process of integration of the Western Balkans into the EU started with Slovenia, as it was recognised that transition and accession are two mutually reinforcing processes, and EU integration is the best way to accelerate and deepen the transition process. Croatia was the second country to join the EU, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia are actively involved in the EU integration process.

Although the countries of the Western Balkans aim to integrate into the European Union, not all have similar attitudes towards EU policies. Serbia's contradictory foreign policy is also reflected in its relations with Russia, as it refused to support the EU sanctions regime related to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (Orraj, 2025). Thus, for a better understanding of the current situation in the Western Balkans, it is necessary to highlight the main aspects of the EU's relationship with the states in the region.

Albania submitted its application for membership of the European Union on 28 April 2009. In October 2013, the Commission recommended without hesitation that Albania be granted the status of candidate country for accession to the Union, which it obtained in June 2014. Given the progress made by Albania, the Commission has repeatedly recommended the opening of accession negotiations with the country. In June 2018, the Council accepted the possibility of opening accession negotiations with Albania in June of the following year, provided that the necessary conditions were met. In March 2020, it finally decided to approve the opening of accession negotiations, pending the fulfilment of a set of conditions. In July 2020, the Commission presented to the Member States the draft negotiating framework (the first to take into account the 'Revised Methodology for the Enlargement of the Western Balkans' published in February 2020). The accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, managed jointly following the positive recommendation shared by the Commission, were officially opened in July 2022, after a particularly lengthy process, mainly due to disagreements between North Macedonia and Bulgaria on identity, language and history.

***Bosnia and Herzegovina.*** Although an SAA with Bosnia and Herzegovina was negotiated and signed in June 2008, its entry into force has been frozen, notably because the country has not transposed a key judgment of the European Court of Human Rights. The Union's revised strategy, which places greater emphasis on the management of economic affairs, resulted in the entry into force of the long-awaited SAA on 1 June 2015. On 15 February 2016, the country submitted its membership application. In May 2019, the Commission published its opinion, including a list of 14 key priorities that Bosnia and Herzegovina needed to fulfil in order to open accession negotiations. One of these priorities is to ensure the proper functioning of the Stabilisation and Association

Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), the parliamentary component of the SAA (key priority 3). On 30 and 31 October 2023, almost eight years after the first unsuccessful PSC meeting in November 2015, a third full meeting of the EU-Bosnia and Herzegovina PSC was successfully held in Sarajevo. This led the Commission to conclude, in its 2023 country report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, that Key Priority 3 had been implemented. Following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the Union's decision in June 2022 to grant candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova, the European Council decided to also grant candidate country status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022. Accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina were officially opened in March 2024, following the Commission's previous positive recommendation earlier this month.

**Republic of North Macedonia.** The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia) applied for membership in March 2004 and was granted candidate country status in December 2005. However, it was unable to enter into accession negotiations for many years, mainly due to its dispute with Greece over the use of the name 'Macedonia'. This dispute was resolved with the Prespa Agreement on the country's new name - the Republic of North Macedonia (or, for short, North Macedonia) - which entered into force in February 2019. Since 2009, the Commission, with the full support of the European Parliament, has consistently recommended the opening of accession negotiations. In June 2018, the Council accepted the possibility of opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia in June 2019, subject to the fulfilment of the necessary conditions. In March 2020, the Council finally decided to approve the opening of accession negotiations without setting any further conditions. In July 2020, the Commission presented the draft negotiating framework to the Member States (the first to take into account the "Revised Western Balkans Enlargement Methodology"). Accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, managed jointly following the positive recommendation shared by the Commission, were officially opened in July 2022, after a particularly lengthy process, mainly due to disagreements between North Macedonia and Bulgaria on identity, language and history.

**Kosovo** is a potential candidate for membership of the Union. It unilaterally declared independence in February 2008. Five EU Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain), two countries in the region (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as the three new candidate countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and two permanent members of the UN Security Council (China and Russia) do not have recognised independence. In July 2018, six years after the publication of a roadmap on visa liberalisation, the Commission confirmed that Kosovo fulfilled all the criteria. Since January 2024, following lengthy inter-institutional negotiations and a final vote by the European Parliament in April 2023, Kosovar citizens have been able to travel visa-free to the Schengen area. Following the conclusion by Belgrade and Pristina of a historic agreement on the normalisation of relations between the two countries in April 2013 (the Brussels Agreement), the European Council decided in June 2013 to open negotiations for an SAA with Kosovo, which entered into force on 1 April 2016 . under the auspices of the Union, which should result in a comprehensive legally binding agreement for the normalisation of their relations. Kosovo (together with Serbia) needs to step up its efforts to fulfil its obligations under a renewed agreement concluded in early 2023 to resume the stalled dialogue.

*Montenegro*, which gained independence in 2006, submitted its application for EU membership in December 2008. It obtained candidate country status in December 2010 and started accession negotiations in June 2012. In line with the Union's 'new strategy' for the accession process, the key chapters on the rule of law — the chapter on judicial reform and judicial freedom<sup>2</sup> and fundamental freedom<sup>2</sup> and justice — were addressed very early in the negotiations, in December 2013. All 33 negotiation chapters have been opened, of which only three are now provisionally closed. The last remaining key chapter (on competition policy) was opened in June 2020. However, political unrest and instability in Montenegro have caused its EU integration process to stall in recent years.

*Serbia* applied for EU membership in December 2009 and was granted candidate status in March 2012, after Belgrade and Pristina reached an agreement on regional representation for Kosovo. Accession negotiations were officially launched on 21 January 2014. The first two chapters, including the one on the normalisation of relations with Kosovo, were opened in December 2015. Key chapters 23 and 24, dedicated to the rule of law, were opened on 18 July 2016. Twenty-two of the thirty-two chapters have been opened so far. have been provisionally closed. "Chapter group 4" – on the environment and connectivity agenda – was opened in December 2021, after two years without opening a new chapter. No new chapters or groups of chapters have been opened since then. Serbia's future integration into the European Union - like that of Kosovo - remains closely linked to the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo under the auspices of the Union, which should lead to a legally binding comprehensive agreement for the normalisation of their relations. Serbia (together with Kosovo) must step up its efforts to fulfil its obligations, stemming from a renewed agreement concluded in early 2023 to resume the stalled dialogue (André De Munter ,2025). The EU accession process of the candidate countries from the Western Balkans includes major difficulties regarding legal criteria of complementarity with the *acquis communautaire* (Corpădean, 2021).

#### **a) Deficiencies in strengthening the rule of law**

The rule of law is one of the essential democratic foundations of the European Union, and its respect is a basic condition for the accession of candidate countries. Although the Western Balkan states have legal and political structures, they still do not meet the European Union standards that prevent them from functioning properly (*L'intégration des Balkans dans l'UE*). In the Western Balkans, the consolidation of the rule of law is a difficult process, affected by the legacy of historical conflicts, political instability and the lack of genuine reforms. The consolidation of the rule of law is influenced and the independence of the judiciary is fragile throughout the region. Courts are often subject to direct or indirect political influence, and judicial councils fail to function as autonomous entities. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Superior Council of Magistracy is criticised by the European Union for its lack of transparency and its links to the political class. In Kosovo, the judiciary is underdeveloped, facing a shortage of human, logistical and financial resources.

The presence of endemic corruption, the lack of independence of the judiciary and political influence over public institutions constitute major obstacles in the European integration process of the states in the Western Balkans region (Nestoraş, 2023). Thus, using the data provided by the European Commission Report (2023) (Annual Activity Report, 2023), the stagnation of reforms in the field of justice in countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania can be highlighted: in Serbia, concerns about "captured state" and the concentration of political power limit democratic progress; in

Bosnia and Herzegovina, the complex institutional structure prevents the unitary implementation of reforms. The phenomenon of “state capture” deeply affects the Western Balkans. Power is often concentrated in the hands of political elites who control institutions for personal or party purposes. In Montenegro, the Democratic Party of Socialists held power for almost three decades, influencing most state institutions. Freedom House classifies the country as a partial democracy, with significant stagnation in reforms. Serbia is another example of a semi-autocratic state, where the press, judiciary and economy are often instruments of the ruling party.

Corruption remains a structural problem in all Western Balkan countries. Transparency International, in its *2024 Corruption Perceptions Index*, indicates scores below 40/100 for Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting a negative public perception of the integrity of public authorities. In Serbia, judicial reforms have been systematically delayed, and appointments to key positions are frequently made on political grounds. Albania has initiated a vetting reform of the judiciary, but the process is slow and the results are mixed, limited by the capacity of institutions to impose effective sanctions. While many countries have adopted legislation in line with the *acquis communautaire*, its application is often arbitrary and inconsistent. Reforms are implemented superficially, to satisfy formal EU requirements, without a real will for structural change. In North Macedonia, although major geopolitical compromises have been made (e.g. changing the country's name), major corruption cases have not been finalized, and the institutions responsible for combating corruption remain weak.

#### **b) National identity and unresolved conflicts**

A significant obstacle to the consolidation of the rule of law in the Western Balkans is represented by persistent disputes over national identity and unresolved ethnic or territorial conflicts. These influence both internal stability and bilateral relations between states. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethno-political divisions paralyze central institutions and maintain a climate of constant tension between the constituent entities. Political leaders exploit nationalist rhetoric to the detriment of interethnic cooperation. In Kosovo, the dispute over international recognition and relations with Serbia continues to affect the normalization process, and the lack of a definitive agreement hampers the European ambitions of both parties. In North Macedonia, identity issues were at the heart of the deadlock with Greece over the name of the state. Although formally resolved through the Prespa Agreement (2018), cultural and linguistic tensions persist, affecting internal cohesion. These unresolved conflicts undermine democratic institutions, justify the postponement of reforms and encourage nationalist discourse, often incompatible with European values.

#### **c) Weak governance and incomplete administrative reforms**

The quality of governance in the Western Balkans is often undermined by a lack of transparency, limited accountability of public institutions and inefficient management of resources. Administrative reforms have been initiated in all candidate countries, but the results are uneven, fragmented and often reversible (Elbasani, 2013).

Emerging from the devastating wars of the 1990s, the countries of the Western Balkans have been confronted with the remnants of conflict. One of the primary legacies from this period and from the times of the former Yugoslavia was the presence of a public administration system predominantly influenced by Serbian bureaucratic traditions. While this system was adapted to the centralized governance of Yugoslavia, it was not

prepared for the comprehensive and nuanced demands of the EU integration process. Several factors come into play when understanding these administrative shortcomings.

First, the region's reliance on a centralized, Serb-dominated bureaucracy meant that there was limited experience and expertise in managing diverse, decentralized administrative structures. In addition, the war left behind a deep distrust among communities. Building an inclusive public administration system that would respond to the diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural groups in the region became a challenge. Second, post-war reconstruction meant that many countries in the region focused primarily on immediate recovery, reconstruction and reconciliation. Building an administrative system aligned with EU standards was not an immediate priority and therefore lagged behind other recovery efforts. Furthermore, funds that could have been allocated to administrative reform were often redirected to more pressing immediate needs.

Third, the conflict had an impact on public administration's ability and knowledge. Many professionals were either part of a system that was not geared toward EU administrative principles, left the region, or were active in the conflict. As a result, there was a shortage of skilled workers who were acquainted with the exacting standards of EU regulations. In the Western Balkans, public administration transformation is an enormous undertaking. To conform to EU rules and objectives, it necessitates not only structural adjustments but also a shift in mindset, culture, and values. In the Western Balkans, public administration transformation is an enormous undertaking. To conform to EU rules and objectives, it necessitates not only structural adjustments but also a shift in mindset, culture, and values. Furthermore, despite the EU's knowledge of these difficulties, the Western Balkans' inadequate ability for efficient public administration is not fully addressed as a factor contributing to the region's delayed EU integration (Nestoraş, 2023).

In Albania and North Macedonia, public administration reform strategies are developed in cooperation with the EU, but their implementation is slow and monitoring is insufficient. The lack of a coherent meritocracy system in hiring civil servants perpetuates the phenomenon of clientelism and reduces the efficiency of institutions. In Serbia, decentralization is superficial, and local authorities have limited competences and depend on politically controlled financial transfers. At the same time, the lack of digitalization of the administration contributes to excessive bureaucracy and opportunities for corruption. Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a special case, with an excessively complex and ethnically fragmented administrative structure, which makes it difficult to coordinate public policies at the national level. According to SIGMA Reports (OECD/EU) (Sigma Monitoring Reports, 2025), the administrative capacity of public institutions in the region is reduced, and public policies are not formulated on a solid analytical basis. The lack of predictability and consultation of stakeholders affects the quality of regulations (Bieber, 2020). In addition, the budget process is not sufficiently transparent and internal audit is poorly developed. This reduces citizens' trust in the state's ability to deliver quality public services and undermines the legitimacy of reforms.

#### **d) The phenomenon of nationalism in the Western Balkans**

Nationalism remains one of the most persistent and destabilizing political forces in the Western Balkans. Although European rhetoric implies reconciliation, regional cooperation and respect for diversity, the realities on the ground indicate a reactivation of nationalist discourses, often politically instrumentalized. These tendencies undermine not only the internal stability of states, but also the credibility of the commitment to

European values (Subotic, 2011). Nationalism is often cultivated and exploited by political parties to consolidate electoral support. Instead of promoting inclusive policies, national leaders frequently resort to patriotic discourses that emphasize ethnic identity and promote a sense of collective victimization. Thus, in Serbia there is the phenomenon of glorification of Serbian nationalism around the myth of Kosovo Polje; In Croatia, historical symbols are often used in political discourse to stimulate national pride, sometimes with revisionist overtones, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, segregated education and separate curricula for Bosniak, Serb and Croat students reinforce identity divisions. In order to consolidate their electoral support, political parties often resort to exploring nationalism. Instead of promoting inclusive policies, national leaders frequently resort to patriotic discourses that emphasize ethnic identity and promote a sense of collective victimization. In Bosnia, entity leaders (e.g. Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska) constantly use a secessionist discourse, threatening to dismember the country. In Kosovo and Serbia, politicians perpetuate antagonistic narratives related to the region's status, blocking the normalization of relations, and in North Macedonia, identity-related conflicts (with Bulgaria and previously with Greece) are instrumentalized for electoral purposes. Also, one of the key challenges is reconciling national and European identity. In many cases, nationalism is perceived as being in opposition to the values of pluralism and multiculturalism promoted by the EU. This contradiction generates an identity ambivalence among citizens: they support European integration, but reject certain European norms perceived as threats to national traditions.

### **3. OBSTACLES FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS**

A bottom-up strategy recognizes how national interest groups focus on Brussels in addition to or instead of the national level. The rise of pro- and anti-EU organizations and parties is also significant. A more challenging area to observe is how top-down pressure causes a change in political conduct that then feeds back to the EU level. The role of the EU as a change agent is evident in the case of many domestic policies, including regional policy. The EU is more of an intervening factor in matters that might have international implications, such as climate policy (Bretherton, Mannin, 2013: 3). There are certain misconceptions regarding Moldova's strategic decision to democratize and implement political, social, and economic reforms in order to secure a European future. Perhaps more difficult than everyone anticipated, the Moldovan route to Europe turned out to be challenging (Putină, Bevziuc, 2014). The gap in development between EU members and non-member states also grows as a result of the expansion of European integration. Therefore, the only practical option for the Republic of Moldova that would guarantee the fulfillment of our requirements and interests on all levels—national, economic, political, and cultural - is membership in the European Union. We run the risk of becoming an isolated state if we keep hesitating in the face of this alternative, which is highly undesirable considering the status of the global economy right now (Iațco, Putină, 2020).

Influenced by the war in Ukraine, relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union are reaching one of the highest points of cooperation. Thus, on February 28, Ukraine applied for EU membership, and the next day, on March 1, 2022, MEPs approved with a majority of 637 votes the resolution that offers Ukraine a European perspective. For the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, which together with Ukraine are part of the Eastern Partnership group of countries, this moment serves as the

European perspective and the objective of becoming full members of the EU. In the circumstances of the war in Ukraine, two days away from Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova submitted applications for membership in the European Union. For these countries, the status of candidate country serves as a political shield of protection against Russia, which has never agreed to the rapprochement of the Eastern Partnership states with the EU (Agora, 2022)

The step that brought the Republic of Moldova closer to the EU was the signing on March 3 by President Maia Sandu of the application for accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Agora, 2022). Thus, March 3, 2022 is a historic date for the Republic of Moldova, it is the date when the application for accession to the European Union was officially submitted. This step marks a significant change in relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, as the Republic of Moldova has also officially started the process of accession to the EU. This evolution of relations will have a significant effect on the EU's requirements for the Republic of Moldova and on the Republic of Moldova's approach to the European Union. Even though the existing Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the EU is very demanding, the application for accession of the Republic of Moldova will raise the requirements to a higher level. The application was submitted under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which provides that "any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union". Also, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part, which recognises the European aspirations and European choice of the Republic of Moldova. Although the Republic of Moldova has made significant steps in its relations with the EU, the state is currently facing a multitude of problems that could compromise the state's European integration aspirations. Thus, among the main problems can be highlighted:

*a) Eastern zone of the Republic of Moldova*

Approximately three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the achievement of independence, but also in the context of the war in Ukraine, the eastern area of the Republic of Moldova remains one of the main problems. The events of February 24, 2022, or the "special operation" of Russia in Ukraine, conditioned the manifestation of increased interest in the Transnistrian area. The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine brought the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova back into the spotlight. The eastern area of the Republic of Moldova, "self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldavian Republic" has an area of 4163 km, which is approximately 12% of the country's territory, and a population of approximately 505153 inhabitants (according to the 2014 census; Horia, 2016). Having its administration: presidency, parliament, and currency, as a result of the conflict of March 2, 1992, the so-called "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR)" developed the structures of a quasi-state. Concerning the Transnistrian region, the situation is ambiguous: on the one hand, the focus of interest and resources on the invasion of Ukraine has weakened Moscow's financing of the region, on the other hand, Transnistria remains the region with an increased risk of the Russians are opening a new front to invade Ukraine, which will directly affect the Republic of Moldova. Positioned between Moldova and Ukraine, the Transnistrian area represents a geopolitical consequence of the Cold War. For a better understanding of the impact that the Transnistrian area can have on regional security, it is necessary to highlight the main aspects that give this region special attention.

The increased interest of Russia towards the Republic of Moldova also depends on the geographical location. The Republic of Moldova is a country where Western powers meet, and Moscow, most likely, "will remain politically paralyzed in the short or even medium term", claims the American agency Stratfor. The geographic location of Moldova makes it important for Russia, being a traditional invasion route from the Southwest and the Balkan states. It is located near the strategic port of Odessa and the Crimean peninsula, where Russia, until 2014, stationed its fleet on the Black Sea and is part of the energy transit network that connects Russia with Europe and Turkey. With the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the emphasis changed, the geostrategic role of the peninsula increased, and the geostrategic role of the Republic of Moldova for Russia decreased. The war started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine has once again brought to the attention of the international community the role that the Transnistrian area can play in Russia's strategies. Although there is a decrease in the geostrategic importance of the Republic of Moldova for the Russian Federation, however, Russia, according to the provisions of the Foreign Policy Concept of December 12, 2016 (Article 58), considers Moldova as an area for which Russian Federation shows interest and speaks for the preservation of the status especially of the Transnistrian region (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2016). In the new version of the *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, adopted on March 31, 2023, the Republic of Moldova is addressed in the context of CIS member states (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2023).

An important aspect that deserves attention is the activity of some companies in the eastern part of the country. The most famous are the enterprises "Pribor", "Metalorucav", "Kirov Electrical Appliances", the industrial complex "Electromash" located in Tiraspol, and the metallurgical and hydraulic industrial complex in Râbnîța, which, under the official cover of production of electrical appliances and household items, they dealt with the illegal production of weapons (until the establishment of the European Union Border Assistance Mission in Moldova and Ukraine - EUBAM). The range of weapons illegally manufactured in these industrial complexes is varied. Thus, among the models of weaponry manufactured illegally in the Transnistrian area, the following can be mentioned: 20-tube multi-launchers, placed on "ZIL 131" and "Ural 365" vehicles (they were exported to conflict areas, such as Abkhazia). Other weapons models are also produced: "Spig-7" and "Spig-9" anti-tank grenade launchers, 82 and 120 mm mines, 50 mm portable mine launchers, "Katran" model. Revolvers of this model are also illegally manufactured: 9mm Pm, 7.62mm Tt, 5.45mm Psm, 7.62mm and 5.45mm, Ak 47 "Kalashnikov" Assault Weapons, 9mm Compact Machine Guns, "Pcela" and "Gnom" Grenade Launchers, "Vasiliok" mines (some of which were sold to the Chechen rebels), "Duga" mobile weapon launchers, Npgm-40 grenade launchers designed for use on Ask 74 machine guns, 82 mm mine launchers, anti-personnel mines Pnd in wooden case, Gp-15 model 40mm grenade launchers (Sartori, 2006). The military base at Cobasna, close to the town of Râbnîța in northern Transnistria, is especially noteworthy in this regard. About 42,000 tons of conventional weaponry, ammunition, and combat gear from the ex-Soviet era were kept at the military warehouse in Cobasna, which covered an area of roughly 132 hectares. The town of Cobasna is 2 kilometers away from the border with Ukraine. The ammunition depot at Cobasna in Transnistria preserves the weapons heritage of the former 14th Army of the Soviet Union, but also part of the armaments of the former GDR and Czechoslovakia: more than 20,000 tons of

ammunition are currently stored here. During the Soviet period, the warehouse in Cobasna was known as warehouse no. 1411 artillery munitions, representing the strategic arsenal of the South-West Military District of the USSR. Most of the ammunition was stored here after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), Czechoslovakia, and other former Warsaw Pact countries (Digi 24, 2022)

Experts from the Academy of Sciences of Moldova carried out some analyses and estimates, back in 2005, according to the known data about the content and quantity of ammunition stored on the left side of the Dniester. Thus, according to studies carried out by AȘM experts, in the event of a deflagration, the power of the explosion could be equivalent to that of an atomic bomb similar to the one dropped on Hiroshima. A possible explosion of the military warehouse in Cobasna can be compared to the detonation of a nuclear bomb with a capacity of 10 kilotons, which was dropped over the city of Hiroshima in 1945 (Reniță, 2020).

A possible explosion of the warehouses can lead to the destruction of brick walls and reinforced concrete structures in the localities located at a distance of 4.5 kilometers from the epicenter. After the explosion, a crater with a radius of 1.5 kilometers and a depth of 75 meters will be formed. However, given that Cobasna is located in a rural environment, the range of the explosion can reach 40-50 kilometers, including as far as Orhei. Therefore, the effects of the explosion can be compared to the damage caused by an earthquake of 7-7.5 degrees. Also, according to experts' estimates, the explosion of the ammunition depot in the village of Cobasna will lead to an impact of the population, to a humanitarian and ecological catastrophe in the north-eastern region of the Republic of Moldova and on the territory of Ukraine over an area of 500 to 3000 kilometers squares. The recycling and evacuation of the armament is in this case the only possibility to prevent any spontaneous explosion of the munitions in the military warehouses in Transnistria (Reniță, 2020).

At the moment, Moscow has roughly twenty thousand tonnes of ammo in the Transnistrian region. The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (FACE) and the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit Declaration specified that these arsenals and forces have to be unconditionally removed from the Republic of Moldova territory by 2002. Russia withdrew from the FACE Treaty in 2007 and is currently holding conditions for the full withdrawal of its military forces and ammunition from the Republic of Moldova. This is in contrast to Chisinau, which focuses on the complete and unconditional withdrawal of military forces and ammunition. As a result, the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict has been delayed. Russia has removed some of its conventional arsenals or has been illegally trafficked and traded in different parts of the world. In the composition of the military and paramilitary forces of Transnistria, there are 16 thousand effective, subdivided into 4 motorized infantry brigades deployed in Tiraspol, Râbnița, and Dubăsari, equipped with advanced equipment and technology. The complex has 18 tanks, 107 armored vehicles, 73 guns, 46 anti-aircraft installations, and 173 antiquarian units. The air fleet consists of 9 Mi-8T helicopters, 6 Mi-24 helicopters, Mi-2 helicopters, and An-2, An-26 and Yak-18 aircraft. Officially, there would be around 1200 Russian soldiers in the area. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the Kyiv press wrote that at least 5 thousand soldiers would be present in Transnistria (*ibidem*). It should also be mentioned that, currently, the following personnel are located in the eastern area:

1. The Ministry of Defense and the General Staff, the security company, or. Tiraspol (about 200 soldiers);

2. 1st Motorized Infantry Brigade, Tiraspol (700 soldiers);
3. 2nd Motorcycle Infantry Brigade (Training Center) or. Bender (600 soldiers);
4. 3rd Motorized Infantry Brigade. Rîbnița 420 soldiers;
5. 4th Motorized Infantry Brigade. Dubăsari 450 soldiers;
6. The independent tank battalion stationed in the village of Vladimirovca (120 soldiers);
7. The independent special destination battalion Tiraspol (100 soldiers);
8. The independent artillery regiment of the village of Parcani (about 200 soldiers);
9. The anti-aircraft artillery regiment of Tiraspol (about 200 soldiers);
10. The independent aviation detachment or. Tiraspol (approx. 150 soldiers);
11. The independent transmission battalion of Tiraspol (about 200 soldiers);
12. The battalion of independent genius in the village of Parcani (about 220 soldiers);
13. Aviation technical base Tiraspol;
14. Base of repair or. Tiraspol;
15. Independent repair battalion or. Tiraspol;
16. The training center of the 4th Infantry Brigade in the village of Afanasievca, about 200 soldiers;
17. Peacekeeping forces Vladimirovca village (450).

Making a calculation, according to the sources cited in 2001, a potential of about 4500 military technical units was concentrated in the eastern area.

Currently, the military formations of the so-called "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR)" are structured by their own military doctrine no. 686, adopted on February 17, 2016, which provides for the maintenance of units with reduced staff, but capable of tripling their staff in case of need. Thus, each infantry brigade includes deployed command, guard, and security subunits (which ensure the daily activity of the unit), as well as one deployed infantry battalion (which ensures the training of recruits and the permanent formation of the military reserve). In case of military danger, the deployment of units to the states of war is foreseen. The material basis of the unrecognized "PMR" military formations is the combat technique, weapons, equipment, ammunition, and other material sources transmitted from the military units of the 14th Army both during the armed conflict of 1992 and in the following period.

At the endowment of the military formations of the so-called "Ministry of Defense of PMR" are: T-64 tanks - 18 units; armored fighting vehicles - 84 units; BTR-60 - 24 units; BTR-70 - 26 units; BTR-80 - 11 units; BTR-D - 12 units; BRDM - 7 units; BMP - 3 units; MTLB - 1un. Artillery pieces about 10 units: self-propelled howitzers 122-mm type "Gvozdika" - 18 units; anti-tank guns 100-mm MT12 - 16 units; 85-mm guns - 12 units; M120 mine launchers - 45 units; 82-mm mine launchers - 40 one; launch systems for reactive projectiles BM-21 "Grad" - 20 un. Anti-aircraft guns - 49: AZP100 type 100-mm caliber - 10 units, C-60 type 57-mm caliber - 12 units; caliber 23mm type ZU 23-2 - 24 units; "Alazani" - 3 un.; complex medium-range (1-18 km) anti-aircraft missile defense systems of the Osa-2 type; short-range (0.3-5km) Igla-type anti-aircraft defense complexes, about 40 "FAGOT" type anti-tank missile complex units, about 30 units; ammunition with bullets about 20 000 un. The aviation subunits have 6 helicopters - MI-8T; 2 helicopters - MI; 1 plane - AN-26; 4 aircraft - AN-2 (2 under conservation); 2

aircraft - IAK-18 (50), 10 IAK-52 aircraft. The MI-8T helicopters are equipped with installations for launching "NURS" type missiles.

Under the management of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (PMR) also are: the internal troops are intended for the protection of state objects and the performance of various service and combat tasks. The composition of the internal troops is: Special Purpose Battalion "Dniester" deployed in the city of Tiraspol, 2 patrol detachments Pervomaisk and Parcani, 7 patrol militia sections, the "Dniester" Battalion is directly subordinated to the Minister of Internal Affairs of the a.z. MRI The workforce has about 400 people. In the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova, there are weapons: 82 mm mine launchers, anti-tank grenade launchers, machine guns, machine guns, sniper rifles, etc. The total strength of the subunits of the internal troops is subordinated to about 700 people. Another institution that has military forces is the Ministry of State Security of the so-called "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic". The following components are part of the Armed Forces of the "RMN": the "Delta" special purpose battalion (located in the city of Tiraspol) with a force of 150 soldiers. Also under the management of the "Ministry" are armored cars, grenade launchers, light weapons, etc.

A component of the forces of the "Ministry" is also the independent Cossack Regiment of Border Guards (stationed in the city of Tiraspol) with an effective number of 300 soldiers. The regiment is equipped with infantry weapons and about 20 BTR-60, and BTR-70 armored personnel carriers. Other military forces present in the Transnistrian area are the border guard troops formed by a training detachment (located in the city of Tiraspol), 7 commands (Camenca, Rîbnița, Dubăsari, Grigoriopol, Bender, Tiraspol, Slobozia), 29 border guard pickets and 30 of border control posts. In the Transnistrian area, there is weaponry: armored fighting vehicles, mine launchers, grenade launchers, light weapons, and a military force of about 1,500 people (*ibidem*).

Also, Cossack troops from the Black Sea Region (ЧерноморскоеКазачьеВойско) are present in the Transnistrian area. The Cossack troops are the main reserve of the "RMN" FA. In the organization "ЧерноморскоеКазачьеВойско" there are 7 Cossack districts, established according to the territorial principle and which bring together the Cossacks from the nearby localities (towns). The number of Cossacks who can be mobilized reaches the figure of 3000 people (the total number of Cossacks and family members is about 10000 people).

The Territorial Defense Corps (people's Militia and Water Territorial Defense Corps (People's Militia and Civil Defense) (народное ополчение) (formed based on the decree of I. Smirnov of March 17, 1992) and the civil defense (formed in 1992) is the reserve of the Armed Forces of the RMN and is structured in territorial battalions. In peacetime, the popular militia and civil defense have permanent headquarters deployed in the district centers. Battalion deployment is carried out in case of military danger or for concentration and training applications. The battalion headquarters is completed with permanent personnel from the battalion commander to the company commander. The general staff has a staff of about 20 people and has an armament of about 150 machine guns. Also, the staff of the general staff constantly conducts combat training exercises with the commanders of the battalion company (*ibidem*: 28-29).

Even if today the Republic of Moldova is not attacked conventionally, Russia has been exercising actions of hybrid aggression for a long time which, in the last period, is even more evident. There were several provocation attempts from Tiraspol throughout 2022. Thus on April 25, the media in the Transnistrian region reported that the so-called Ministry of State Security in Tiraspol was bombed with grenade launchers, even though

at the time of the attack the building was empty. Later, on the morning of April 26, two explosions rang out in the Grigoriopol district, as a result of which two radio antennas of the "Maiak" center were taken out of operation. An attack on the military airfield in Tiraspol was also announced. Another indicator of security danger was the organization by the Russian military of military exercises and applications with grenade launchers in the Transnistrian region, an announcement made by the Russian Ministry of Defense itself. Meanwhile, the authorities in Kyiv sound the alarm regarding new threats to Ukraine's security coming from the left of the Dniester ( Benchechi, 2023).

*b) Economic effects*

Immediate and medium-term effects of the war in Ukraine on the economy of the Republic of Moldova, according to the director of Expert-Group, Adrian Lupusor:

- the suspension of several supply chains of the Republic of Moldova with food products, including from the basic package;
- suspension of raw material imports for processing industries, for example the furniture industry;
- the continuous increase in the prices of energy resources;
- the need for companies to adapt, the identification of other import sources;
- increased transportation and logistics costs;
- inflationary effects.

The Republic of Moldova was strongly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Inflation rose from 18.52% in February to 33.55% in August 2022, according to data provided by the National Bank of Moldova. An important aspect of the war in Ukraine is the fact that exports from the Republic of Moldova in 2022 exploded. If in 2021 exports totaled 3.1 billion dollars, in 2022 they increased to 4.3 billion dollars. According to the expert Veaceslav Ioniță, the war in Ukraine brought back to life the railway in the Republic of Moldova, which was practically inactive. The volume of transport services operated by rail in 2006 was 3.7 billion tons/km. A steady decline followed, reaching 0.6 billion tonnes/km in 2020 and rising to 0.7 billion tonnes/km in 2021.

*c) Energy dependence*

Due to the 80 percent energy dependence of the Republic of Moldova on the Cuciurgan Power Plant in the Transnistrian region, Moscow has kept Chisinau under pressure for three decades. The war in Ukraine, including the energy crisis, has a direct impact on the energy security of the Republic of Moldova, highlighting a multitude of state vulnerabilities and inabilities present in the energy sector.

We highlight the same situation in the case of electricity, maintaining dependence on the Russian Federation through energy exported from the secessionist region (fed with Russian gas), and interconnection with international suppliers would allow for minimizing this dependence, bypassing the region controlled by the Russian Federation. In this sense, the Republic of Moldova and Romania will develop a joint action plan in case of an energy crisis, establishing a series of measures for the supply of electricity and natural gas: providing each other with alternative fuels to produce thermal energy 29 of the systems of central heating and electricity and thermal energy in cogeneration ( Ursula von der Leyen o asigură pe Maia Sandu), thus, harmonizing national and European legislation in terms of energy.

The European Commission, in the context of the war started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, is ready to provide support to Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova,

and Georgia to ensure reliable and sustainable energy, ensuring the emergency synchronization of the electricity networks of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova with the European continental network (REPowerEU).

The Republic of Moldova was connected to the European energy network ENTSO-E (March 2022) (*Republica Moldova și Ucraina*) protecting itself from the perspective of energy security and minimizing the dependent influence on the secessionist region of the country. The beginning of the electrical interconnection between Romania and the Republic of Moldova will be possible after the construction, equipping, and commissioning of a 500Mw Back-to-Back station in Vulcanesti and a 330kV line to Chisinau which will allow the import of a larger amount of electricity from Romania. Also, the 2nd part of the Moldova-Romania electrical interconnection project involves the development of the 400 kV lines Iași-Ungheni-Strășeni and the 400 kV line Bălți-Suceava (Ministerul Afacerilor Externe și Integrării Europene. Energie, 2023).

Although the interconnection to the European energy system is crucial for the development of the country's energy sector, the natural gas market is currently a priority. Thus, the expansion of the Iași-Ungheni-Chisinau gas pipeline is possible by implementing it in parallel with the interconnection carried out on the electricity market in Romania (*Cenușă, 2016*). In this context, the Republic of Moldova will be able to diversify both its natural gas and electricity supply sources. In this way, the Republic of Moldova has the chance to reduce its electricity dependence on the secessionist region and Gazprom's natural gas dependence. In the context of the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis, the international assistance granted to the Republic of Moldova, to overcome the created situation, was crucial to the dependence options presented by the Russian Federation. The integration carried out in the European energy space contributed to the reduction of dependence on the secessionist regime, but also on the Russian Federation. Thus, maintaining relations with European partners in providing security support in the field has accelerated the reorientation of the Republic of Moldova to the European energy system.

#### *d) The social-political dimension*

The refugee crisis and the help offered to refugees from Ukraine by citizens and authorities, represent a challenge to society in the Republic of Moldova. Since February 24, 2022, approximately 688,000 refugees from Ukraine have crossed the territory of the Republic of Moldova. Currently, the Republic of Moldova hosts over 80,000 refugees from Ukraine, more than half of whom are children. Thus, on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, refugees from Ukraine have full, free, and non-discriminatory access to medical assistance services. At the same time, the authorities of the Republic of Moldova ensured that the general education institutions in the country offer opportunities for all children from refugee families from Ukraine to participate in the educational process (*Parlamentul Republicii Moldova*).

Analyzing the consequences or effects of the presence of refugees from Ukraine on the Republic of Moldova, it should be noted that they had a positive influence on the Moldovan economy. They, being accommodated on the territory of our country, consumed goods bringing money to the national budget. At the same time, they glorified the HoReCa branch, staying in hotels, motels, and tourist guesthouses. Ukrainian companies glorified the Moldovan railways, but also the transport branch, transporting goods from and to Ukraine.

Analyzing the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Republic of Moldova, it should be noted that it had a positive impact on the political dimension of Moldovan-

European relations. Influenced by the war in Ukraine, relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union reached one of the highest points of cooperation. Thus, on February 28, Ukraine applied to join the EU, and the next day, on March 1, 2022, the MEPs approved with a majority of 637 votes the resolution that offers Ukraine a European perspective. For the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, which together with Ukraine are part of the group of countries of the Eastern Partnership, this moment serves as the European perspective and the objective of becoming full members of the EU. In the circumstances of the war in Ukraine, two days away from Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova submitted applications to join the European Union. For these countries, the status of a candidate country serves as a political shield of protection against Russia, which has never agreed to the rapprochement of the Eastern Partnership states with the EU (Agora, 2022a).

The step that brought the Republic of Moldova closer to the EU was the signing on March 3 by President Maia Sandu of the request for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Agora, 2022b).

Considering the common values and the close ties between the partners, established in the past by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their member states, on the one hand, and the Republic of Moldova, on the other, and which are developing within the European policy neighborhood and of the Eastern Partnership, and recognizing the common desire of the parties to develop, consolidate and further expand their relations. According to the provisions of the Agreement, the common values on which the EU is founded, namely democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the rule of law, also constitute the very essence of the political association and economic integration provided for in this Agreement. The agreement will pave the way for future progressive developments in EU-Republic of Moldova relations.

Recognizing that the Republic of Moldova, as a European country, has a common history and shares common values with the member states and is committed to implementing and promoting these values, which are a source of inspiration for the European choice of the country. Committing to strengthen respect for fundamental freedoms, human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, democratic principles, the rule of law, as well as good governance, on behalf of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, efforts are being made for the development of a democratic and European country, whole and free (CRJM, 2015).

Referring to the provisions of Article 2 of the Treaty of Accession to the European Union (TEU), we can mention that the values on which the EU focuses are: "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, as well as respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the member states in a society where pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men prevail".

Any potential future EU member state will be assessed against these values. The country's ability to demonstrate its willingness to act on these values will be essential for EU membership. As the EU is, at its core, the largest European peace project of all time, sharing and promoting these common values becomes particularly important in light of the war in Ukraine and other threats to European peace (Chirtoc, 2022). A no less important moment in the strengthening of Moldovan-European relations in the context

of the war in Ukraine was the submission of the European Commission's questionnaire regarding the EU accession request of the Republic of Moldova. After receiving Moldova's request, the Council invited the European Commission to present its opinion on Moldova's request, as the EU's first step in the accession process. To draft such an Opinion, the Commission presented a detailed Questionnaire to the Republic of Moldova. Based on the answers to the Questionnaire, which were elaborated and sent by the Republic of Moldova, the Commission issued its opinion with the following recommendations:

- To recommend the granting of Candidate country status for Moldova and the possibility for Moldova to start accession negotiations.
- To recommend the granting of Candidate status, but only after the fulfillment of specific conditions by Moldova.

The Member States of the EU decided the request for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, deciding unanimously, based on the Opinion of the Commission. Once the Republic of Moldova received the status of a Candidate country, the date for the opening of EU accession negotiations was set (most likely after the Republic of Moldova fulfilled additional conditions). Accession negotiations will be conducted until the country fulfills all EU accession requirements, in particular the political criteria requirements, as the fundamental values of the EU, as defined in Article 2 of the TEU, are assessed within the political criteria. Once the accession conditions of the Republic of Moldova are agreed upon, the Accession Treaty is negotiated, approved, and signed by Moldova and all EU Member States and the accession date is set. Also, to legitimize this step, the Republic of Moldova will organize a referendum in which its citizens will decide on the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union. Also, the Accession Treaty must be approved by the European Parliament and ratified by the Republic of Moldova, as well as by the national parliament of each EU Member State before it enters into force.

The questionnaire was the first crucial step in the EU accession process, which demonstrated the readiness of the Republic of Moldova to react through prompt and precise answers. Also, the Questionnaire was structured in such a way as to respect the format of the accession negotiations, which are organized in such a way as to include the Copenhagen accession criteria of 1993:

- 1) political criteria: the stability of the institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the respect and protection of minorities;
- 2) economic criteria: a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competition and market forces;
- 3) the capacity to assume the obligations arising from EU membership, including the administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the entire EU acquis (organized in over 30 negotiating chapters).

Thus, on April 11, 2022, in Luxembourg, the Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, handed to the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Nicu Popescu, the European Commission's questionnaire regarding the EU accession application of the Republic of Moldova. The answers that will be given to the questions in this questionnaire will represent the x-ray of the current situation in our country, showing the level of preparation for joining the European Union and, at the same time, highlighting the areas where additional efforts are needed. *"Our country is accelerating its European journey. I reiterated that we are part of Europe not only geographically, but also through the identity we carry, the values we*

*share, through the Romanian language, the official EU language we speak, and through the common history we have.*" - said Deputy Prime Minister Nicu Popescu (MAERM, 2022).

The status of a candidate country would also mobilize the authorities to identify real solutions to two big problems that Moldova has in the perspective of accession: the Transnistrian problem and cleanliness in the field of justice. "Completion of the integration will only be possible when the Transnistrian issue is resolved, but this should not prevent us from working on the other files", says MEP Siegfried Mureșan. And Chisinau is tying its hopes regarding the settlement of the Transnistrian dispute to a possible victory of Ukraine in the war launched by Russia against it - a victory that would radically change the outlook of the pro-Russian separatist regime on the left of the Dniester (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2022).

The date of May 19, 2022, was also an important one for the Republic of Moldova. It is the date when the European Parliament adopted the annual report on the implementation of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Agreement, with 512 votes "for", 43 votes "against" and 39 abstentions. The report includes a call for the European Union to provide more strategic support to Moldova after submitting its application to join the bloc. In the context of a worsening security environment, the text recognizes that the war in Ukraine has disproportionately affected the Republic of Moldova. Its economy has been affected by the loss of import and export opportunities and the rapid increase in energy prices, and the Republic of Moldova has also received the largest number of Ukrainian refugees per population than any other country, putting pressure on public services.

MEPs also draw attention to the need for more strategic aid for the Republic of Moldova, especially by establishing a support group of the Commission for this country, similar to the existing one for Ukraine. The report also emphasizes that the accession applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia open a new chapter in their European integration, which should be characterized by strengthened efforts to implement the association agreements and the components of trade liberalization. Last but not least, MEPs express their concern about a series of recent security incidents in the separatist region of Transnistria and condemn them as dangerous acts of provocation committed in a very volatile security situation. They reiterate their support for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Transnistria, based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova (Călugăreanu, 2022a, 2022b).

The text of the Resolution states that the Republic of Moldova was disproportionately affected by the Russian war in Ukraine. This is mainly due to the arrival of more than 450,000 Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the invasion - of which almost 80,000 have remained in the Republic of Moldova - but also due to the decrease in trade and the increase in energy and transport prices. To this end, MEPs are calling for the EU to provide more support to the country, namely through new macro-financial assistance, additional transport and trade liberalization measures, and continued support for refugee management and humanitarian purposes (UCHCR, 2025).

In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the Parliament welcomes the official application of the Republic of Moldova for EU membership submitted on 3 March 2022 and states that the EU should grant it the status of a candidate country, by Article 49 of the TEU and "based on merits". Meanwhile, the European Union and the Republic of Moldova should continue their efforts to integrate the country into the EU

single market and to strengthen sectoral cooperation. The MEPs also ask the European Commission to quickly complete the evaluation of the request and to provide full assistance to the Republic of Moldova during this process. They state that, without anticipating the content of the Commission's opinion, the Moldovan authorities are undoubtedly on the right track by adopting key reforms, particularly in terms of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2022).

The resolution also expresses its deep concern about the developments on the territory of the Transnistria region, which recorded a series of "security incidents" in April 2022 considered by MEPs as dangerous provocative acts in an extremely tense security situation. They also reiterate Parliament's support for a "comprehensive, peaceful and sustainable political solution to the Transnistrian conflict", namely based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders, as well as the withdrawal of stationed Russian forces there.

The Parliament emphasizes that it is unacceptable for Russia to use gas supplies as a weapon to exert political pressure on the Republic of Moldova, and to influence the country's political trajectory and geopolitical orientation, especially after the recent installation of the country's pro-Western government. MEPs call on the Commission and EU countries to support Moldova in ensuring its energy independence, connectivity, diversification, and energy efficiency, as well as in accelerating the development of renewable energy sources ).

Through the "historic" decision taken unanimously by the EU leaders, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova received the status of candidate countries for EU accession. By granting candidate status to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, the EU enlargement paradigm changed, and the enlargement policy received a new boost, qualifying the decision of the EU leaders as "a big step" and a historic step (Moldova Suverană, 2022)

Also, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia received a new impetus to implement the reforms and projects that are still needed to take the next step in the historic achievement. Granting the European perspective to the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia represents important steps forward. This decision brings hope and confidence in the European future to the people of these countries and represents a great responsibility for their leaders (Agora 2022a).

Although the Republic of Moldova received on June 23, 2022, the status of a candidate country for accession to the European Union (EU), this status does not offer the status of a member state of the EU, as it is necessary for Moldova to fulfill a series of conditions for accession, as well as to apply European legislation in all areas. Experts in the field of international relations and European integration mention that the European path of the Republic of Moldova is difficult and that, in the context of the challenges faced by the EU, but also the countries with candidate status for accession, it may last an indefinite period. The relationship of the Republic of Moldova with the European Union brings security support to Romania even in the context of the war in Ukraine of 150 million euros for the support of Moldova. The assistance consists of non-reimbursable funds of 30 million euros and loans under advantageous conditions of 120 million euros. The Republic of Moldova is the European country that received the largest number of refugees from Ukraine compared to its population. Over 370,000 refugees crossed the border of the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the Plenary of the European Parliament with a

large majority, 558 votes "for" and 10 abstentions and 20 "against" decided to grant macroeconomic assistance (European Commission, 2022). In the context of the war in Ukraine, Oliver Varhelej, the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement mentioned that the EU has increased the budgetary support offered to the Republic of Moldova. The €6 million support offered in December 2021 to manage the energy crisis is supported by another €75 million. The money was provided to overcome the challenges posed by Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. In addition to managing the crisis, the EU continues to support the long-term resilience of the Republic of Moldova, in particular through the Eastern Partnership Investment Plan, which involves providing 34 billion euros for public and private investments in several key areas: support for SMEs, trade facilitation, energy efficiency (Moldova Suverană, 2022)

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The process of accession to the European Union is a complex, multidimensional and profound one, not only in terms of fulfilling the formal criteria, but also in terms of the internal stability of the candidate states. Internal divisions, be they ethnic, political or regional, as well as the low level of social cohesion prove to be major and persistent obstacles that limit the capacity of these countries to implement the reforms required by Brussels sustainably and efficiently.

Thus, the experience of the Western Balkan states highlights how unresolved conflicts, societal fragmentation and chronic political instability can slow down the process of Europeanization, even in the face of a formal commitment to EU values. Similarly, the Republic of Moldova faces its own challenges related to political polarization, the lack of a broad consensus on the direction of the state's development, but also problems of social and geographical integration, especially in the context of the separatist region of Transnistria.

Based on these considerations, European integration cannot be treated exclusively as a technocratic or diplomatic project, but must be understood and approached in depth, as a process of internal transformation, which involves strengthening trust between citizens and institutions, reducing social gaps and promoting a common pro-European identity. Without these foundations, even the most ambitious reforms risk being reversible or not producing sustainable effects. Therefore, for the Western Balkans and the Republic of Moldova to be able to make real progress towards EU accession, a strategic and integrated approach is essential, combining external support with coherent internal efforts to build a cohesive, inclusive and resilient society.

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