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**THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA WITHIN THE EASTERN  
PARTNERSHIP. GEOPOLITICAL ANTAGONISM AND PUBLIC  
PERCEPTIONS SHAPING**

Doctoral Thesis  
SUMMARY

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The Soviet legacy remained deeply rooted in Moldovan society. The choice of the country's orientation towards future European integration has not been easy, nor has it proved to be an irreversible process in the decades that followed. Geopolitical contextualization has led to a new reality: the Republic of Moldova is geographically situated on the periphery of the EU and NATO borders, but also on the periphery of a Russian sphere of influence over which the Russian Federation exercises a kind of “right of claim” by virtue of its Soviet legacy. The eastward Euro-Atlantic expansion, Romania's integration into the European Union and NATO, has led to this reality, which has also brought about geopolitical change for the Republic of Moldova. The geographical proximity through the direct border with the geopolitical West and the special relationship with Romania have brought about profound changes in the Republic of Moldova in the last two decades. Domestic political actors have played a decisive and transforming role in Moldova's approach towards the EU.

Two years after Romania's accession to the EU, the political landscape in the Republic of Moldova underwent a major change following the popular uprising in spring 2009. It was also the starting year of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). For 15 years in a row, the Republic of Moldova has been an active participant in the EaP initiative. The relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU in the framework of the cooperation program - EaP is a complex dimension, especially in terms of analyzing the geopolitical antagonism and the perceptions' shaping of the EU's relations with the Republic of Moldova. From this debate, *the central theme* of this doctoral thesis was developed, argued and substantiated: the analysis of Moldova's participation in the EaP and the results achieved from it, from the perspective of the realist theory of international relations seen through a conflictual competition between the two geopolitical spheres on the periphery of which Moldova has been during this period. The focus is therefore not only on the participation of the Republic of Moldova in what we know after 2008 to be the Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), but also on the geopolitical contextualization and the dual choice of the Moldovan society.

Through its heritage, its demographic, ethno-linguistic and cultural-religious structure, the Moldovan society has remained connected to the Russian Federation, to what the concept of the “Russian world” represents in the discourses and messages broadcasted through various channels by Moscow. At the same time, aspirations for a democratic model, for the well-being and freedom offered by the prospect of European membership have led young people in particular to choose to look increasingly to the West.

This dimension of the evolution of public perception, seen both antagonistically by positioning itself in the proximity of a geopolitical fissure that runs through Moldovan society and a diametrically opposed geopolitical positioning in relation to its identity, represents *a secondary thematic dimension* of this thesis. We identify in the society of the Republic of Moldova a geopolitical polarization and fragmentation generating border constructions in relation to identity. Thus, in the Republic of Moldova the choice of preference regarding the geopolitical orientation

of the state was made in relation to the ethno-national, linguistic, cultural or religious identity group.

The need for thorough research on this topic is aimed at in-depth knowledge and understanding of the chosen theme, involving the research of the specific problematization, with contextualization and conceptualization, by highlighting the evolution of Moldova's participation in the EaP. Thus, it is extremely important to analyze the participation of Moldova in the EaP in the context of the regional and international geopolitical framework, based on the geopolitical competition between East and West.

By analyzing the evolution of public perceptions regarding the geopolitical choices made by the Moldovan society through the historical method of analysis we can highlight the importance of the dual and antagonistic factor, the choice of geopolitical options that appear as existential dilemmas at the level of a society located at the geopolitical borders of the West and the East. On the one hand, the Republic of Moldova finds itself on the frontier of the West, and on the other hand in the Russian sphere of influence, over which the Russian Federation exerts control through soft and hard power. The complexity of the analysis, given the nature of the objectives assumed in the present research, is conferred by the reference to the identity of these geopolitical options.

**The motivation** for this research is the need to clarify from the theoretical, conceptual and practical point of view the results achieved by the Republic of Moldova in the context of its participation in the PaE initiative. In addition to the historical analysis, the paper also studies and analyzes the political approaches and the format of Moldova's cooperation with the European Union in the period 2009 - 2024.

At the same time, the thesis is a logical continuation of the author's professional development. Since 2017, the author has been working in the field of diplomacy in the “Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova”, and as such we could observe a real interest in the Moldovan society to clarify the evolution and results of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the country's European integration process. Beginning with 2009, since its participation in the EaP, the Republic of Moldova, through the progress achieved, has been constantly getting closer to the EU, which has reached a peak with the official opening of accession negotiations in 2024, representing the real results of the country.

**The originality** of the research is evidenced by the intertwining of professional expertise, scientific and academic training and knowledge of the languages in which specific documents are found (including Russian). The originality of the doctoral thesis is expressed in the treatment of the subject of accession and rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova to the EU through a reference to the theory of realism and the approach to issues such as *geopolitical antagonism and the shaping of public perceptions*, including in relation to the ethno-national, linguistic, cultural and religious identity of the main communities in the Republic of Moldova. In this way, a number of trends in public perceptions have been identified and highlighted in the historical evolution, which allows the expression of trends and the development of patterns in relation to the analyzed

theme. All this can then constitute a useful set for understanding the behavior of identity communities in the Republic of Moldova in relation to the process of European integration, which is at an incipient stage.

**The relevance** of the paper is conferred precisely by the nature of the research, the topicality and relevance of the *analyzed topic*. The European course of the Republic of Moldova, analyzed from a realistic perspective, understood through the complexity of the geopolitical context, of the competition between the Russian Federation and the EU/NATO, and last but not least through a deeper understanding of the domestic societal context, gives a particular importance in terms of the relevance of the analysis for society, academia and the act of governance in particular. From this analysis, it is possible to develop consistent proposals for public policies that are useful and relevant in the process of Moldova's rapprochement with the EU. The thematic relevance is also given by the appeal to the special relationship given by the common cultural-historical heritage, the common consciousness of nation and language and the direct proximity between the Republic of Moldova and Romania. Thus, the thesis contributes to the academic and practical knowledge of the special relationship between the two states through a contextualized analysis of the European integration process.

In terms of the thematic analysis, *the argument of the methodological concept* that we propose is based on the need to understand the participation of the Republic of Moldova in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the rapprochement of this state to the EU in the period after the launch of this initiative in Brussels.

Beyond the simple analysis of this path of the Republic of Moldova and of the implications arising from this evolution, our methodological concept leads us to a diachronic perspective on the influence of the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova, and implicitly on the results of the EaP, on *two dimensions* pursued throughout this PhD thesis:

1. the *external* one, i.e. the influence on the relations and cooperation that the Republic of Moldova has with the Russian Federation (our perspective in this case is based on the following premises: the relationship inherited from the Soviet period; the desire of the Russian Federation to maintain political and geopolitical influence in Chișinău; the pressure of Russian influence on the security level – by keeping Russian soldiers in the Transnistrian region; the pressure exerted through energy constraints/gas war; the existence of pressure of an unconventional nature/hybrid war; soft influence through Orthodoxy and the Russian language, all the more so as there is a larger Russian-speaking community in Moldova than the self-declared ethnic Russians – in this case the cultural-linguistic dimension is likely to gain even greater relevance);
2. the *internal* one, that of shaping public perceptions in the Republic of Moldova in relation to the antagonistic geopolitical choices that the Moldovan population and the Moldovan state have to make. The Republic of Moldova is facing not only a simple choice between the East, geopolitically represented by the Russian Federation, and the West,

represented by the EU, but also an internal clarification effort based on the premise of an identity rift leading to a geopolitical split in the population. Therefore, the dual, antagonistic perspective of the geopolitical options that appear as existential dilemmas at the level of a society on the geopolitical borders of the West and the East is very important. Our attention is drawn to the reality of the existence of cleavages in Moldovan society caused by identity polarization. Ethno-cultural and linguistic communities react in solidarity in the process of choosing the geopolitical option between the EU and the preservation of Russian influence as part of the Soviet geopolitical legacy.

### **Purpose of the thesis**

The aim of this thesis is to *analyze the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU as reflected in the results of the PaE and through the prism of shaping domestic public perceptions in the context of geopolitical disputes between the Russian Federation and the European Union.*

The central focus of the analysis is the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU in the framework of the PaE, the analysis of the PaE results through the complex dimensions of the analysis of geopolitical antagonism, the shaping of public perceptions in relation to the choice of geopolitical option. Thus, it results in an interdisciplinary analysis of Moldova's participation in the EU initiative of the EaP, the results achieved by Moldova from the perspective of the realist theory of international relations viewed through a conflictual competition between the two geopolitical spheres on the periphery of which Moldova has been throughout this period.

### **Specific objectives**

The research is based on four specific objectives designed to support the fulfillment of the proposed goal:

O.1. *To explore and analyze the performance of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership from a realistic perspective on East-West disputes.* The focus in this regard is on highlighting and analyzing the path within the EaP initiative through an announced call for understanding Moldova's international relations from a realist theory perspective.

O.2. *Analyzing the role of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union in influencing relations with the Russian Federation.* The achievement of the first objective allows us to explore the effect of the results of the EaP, of the progress achieved in the Republic of Moldova's rapprochement with the EU, on relations with the Russian Federation. In the absence of measurable indicators for the entire period under analysis, we propose to identify and analyze the effect and influence of this rapprochement with the EU on relations with the Russian Federation.

O.3. *To examine how the results of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union have been reflected in shaping public perceptions.* At another level we look at whether the results of the EaP



have been reflected in shaping public perceptions. Methodologically, we can trace this only by appealing to researches and surveys carried out by various institutes and organizations that have systematically and constantly carried out such researches during the period 2009-2024. We track whether the public opinion and perceptions have been shaped in relation to expectations, successes or failures in achieving tangible results in the relationship with the EU during the participation of the Republic of Moldova in the EaP.

O.4. *Identifying a pattern of shaping public perceptions in the Republic of Moldova in the context of an existent relationship between identity cleavage and geopolitical choices.* At an in-depth level, after achieving the other objectives, we aim to identify possible patterns of shaping public perceptions in relation to ethno-national and linguistic identity mainly, and tangentially to the cultural-religious one. Starting also from other analyses, and carrying out specific case studies on the Transnistrian region and ATU of Gagauzia, we intend to verify whether the Russian, Gagauzian or Bulgarian communities had other geopolitical preferences in accordance with the external orientation of the state and whether patterns of shaping public perceptions in relation to identity have developed in the Republic of Moldova.

### **Hypotheses**

Our research is mixed qualitative and quantitative, with an obvious emphasis on qualitative research. Although traditionally qualitative research has not developed research tools to test hypotheses, we wish to explore four working hypotheses within this thesis.

In line with this methodological concept, the four research hypotheses are as follows:

H.1 *The positive results of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership were decisively geopolitically influenced.*

H.2. *The European course of the Republic of Moldova has not been a constant one, being influenced by the internal and external political choices of the governments.*

H.3. *Public perceptions of geopolitical choices were shaped in relation to the results within the Eastern Partnership.*

H.4. *The identity cleavage in the Republic of Moldova marks deeply the geopolitical elections and the results of the Eastern Partnership.*

### **Research questions**

In this thesis, the research questions have been formulated in such a way as to contribute to the objectives of the paper and to allow for a detailed exploration of Moldova's performance in the Eastern Partnership through the lens of geopolitical antagonism and shaping public perceptions. The research questions, correlated with the announced objectives and hypotheses, are as follows:

RQ.1. *What were the main results of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership and how were they reflected in the geopolitical choices of the Moldovan society between the European Union and the Russian Federation?*

This question leads us to look for an answer in a first stage of the analysis by identifying the main results of Moldova's participation in the framework of the EaP. In the next stage we propose to analyze public perceptions and to look for an answer to the way in which the results of the EaP are reflected in the public perception in the Republic of Moldova regarding the preference of external relations with the EU or the Russian Federation.

R.Q.2. *Has there been a shaping of public perceptions in relation to the results of the Eastern Partnership and the commitments of the European Union towards the Republic of Moldova?*

The second question is driven by the answer to the first. The focus is directed on shaping public perceptions in relation to the results of the EaP and EU commitments towards the Republic of Moldova. The answer is given by the diachronic analysis of public perceptions in relation to certain moments given by the achievement of tangible results and EU commitments or lack of EU commitments in relation to the European path of the Republic of Moldova.

RQ. 3. *How have identity cleavages and separatist tendencies in Transnistria and Gagauzia influenced the geopolitical choices of the Republic of Moldova?*

The third question is the one that leads to the most in-depth analysis in this thesis: establishing a causal link between the shaping of public perceptions and the identity-community dimension of the population. Thus, we aim to find answers to the emergence of behavioral patterns and the shaping of public perceptions regarding geopolitical preference choices in relation to the ethnicity, language, culture or religion of community members.

## Research design

### Summary dimension of the research plan

Stage	Objective	Hypothesis	Research question	Method / procedure
<i>Preparatory stage</i>	-	-	-	Analysis of documentary sources Bibliographic analysis Preliminary documentary analysis
<i>First stage of research:</i> developing the contextual, theoretical and conceptual framework	Tangential and contextual: O.1 <i>Exploring and analyzing Moldova's</i>	Tangential and contextual: I.1. <i>Moldova's positive results within the Eastern Partnership</i>	Tangential and contextual: IC.1. <i>What were the main results of the Republic of Moldova's</i>	Document analysis Historical method

Stage	Objective	Hypothesis	Research question	Method / procedure
of the research. It is mainly found in Chapter 2. <i>Contextual and theoretical framework of the research.</i>	<i>performance within the Eastern Partnership from a realistic perspective on East-West disputes</i>	<i>have been decisively influenced geopolitically</i>	<i>participation in the Eastern Partnership and how were they reflected in the geopolitical choices of the Moldovan society between the European Union and the Russian Federation?</i>	Comparative analysis Statistical analysis Synthesis Description Explanation
<b>Second stage:</b> introductory-descriptive and explanatory level of analysis of the EU Eastern Partnership initiative. It is mainly found in Chapter 3. <i>The EU Eastern Partnership initiative.</i>	Tangential and contextual: O.1. <i>Exploring and analyzing Moldova's performance within the Eastern Partnership from a realistic perspective on East-West disputes</i>	Tangential and contextual: H.1. <i>Moldova's positive results in the Eastern Partnership have been decisively influenced geopolitically</i>	Tangential and contextual: RQ.1. <i>What were the main results of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership and how were they reflected in the geopolitical choices of the Moldovan society between the European Union and the Russian Federation?</i>	Document analysis Historical method Comparative analysis Synthesis Description Explanation
<b>The third stage</b> of the research is the analysis of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the EaP, the results of the EaP. It is mainly found in Chapter 4. <i>The Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership.</i>	O.1. <i>Exploring and analyzing the results of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership from a realistic perspective on East-West disputes</i>	I.1. <i>The positive results of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership have been decisively influenced geopolitically;</i> I.2. <i>The European course of the Republic of Moldova has not been a constant one, being influenced by the internal and external political choices of the rulers</i>	IC.1. <i>What were the main results of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership and how were they reflected in the geopolitical choices of the Moldovan society between the European Union and the Russian Federation?</i>	Document analysis Historical method Comparative analysis Statistical analysis Qualitative and quantitative research
<b>Stage 4</b> , <i>The influence of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership on relations with the Russian Federation, (included in Chapter 5)</i>	O.2. Tangential and contextual: I.1. <i>The positive results of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership were determinantly influenced geopolitically;</i>	Tangential and contextual: I.1 <i>Moldova's positive results within the Eastern Partnership have been determinantly influenced geopolitically;</i> I.2. <i>The European course of the Republic of Moldova has not been constant, being influenced by the internal and external political choices of the rulers</i>	Tangential and contextual: IC.1. <i>What were the main results of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership and how were they reflected in the geopolitical choices of the Moldovan society between the European Union and the Russian Federation?</i>	Document analysis Historical method Comparative analysis Statistical analysis Synthesis Description Explanation

Stage	Objective	Hypothesis	Research question	Method / procedure
<p><b>Stage five:</b> analyzing public perceptions of geopolitical choices and preferences in relation to identity and by referring to tangible outcomes of the EaP. This phase is reflected in the analysis in Chapter 6. <i>The evolution and shaping of public perceptions of Moldova's geopolitical choices in relation to identity cleavages and PaE outcomes.</i></p>	<p>O.3. <i>Examining how the results of the Republic of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union have been reflected in shaping public perceptions;</i></p> <p>O.4. <i>Identifying a pattern of shaping public perceptions in the Republic of Moldova in the context of an existent relationship between identity cleavage and geopolitical choices</i></p>	<p>I.3. <i>Public perceptions of the geopolitical elections were shaped in relation to the results within the Eastern Partnership;</i></p> <p>I.4. <i>The identity cleavage in the Republic of Moldova deeply marks the geopolitical elections and the results of the Eastern Partnership</i></p>	<p>IC.2. <i>Has there been a shaping of public perceptions in relation to the results of the Eastern Partnership and the European Union's commitments towards the Republic of Moldova?</i></p> <p>IC.3. <i>How have the identity cleavage and separatist tendencies in Transnistria and Gagauzia influenced the geopolitical choices of the Republic of Moldova??</i></p>	<p>Document analysis</p> <p>Historical method</p> <p>Comparative analysis</p> <p>Statistical analysis</p> <p>Case study</p> <p>Qualitative and quantitative research</p> <p>Description</p> <p>Explanation</p>
<p><b>The final stage</b> is the elaboration of the set of conclusions and theoretical and applied contributions that the work has from an academic point of view. It is mainly found in the Conclusions chapter</p>	-	-	-	<p>Synthesis</p> <p>Description</p> <p>Explanation</p>

### Documentation sources

The research process on a topic as complex as the dynamics of cooperation within the EaP required the selection of relevant, diverse, current and useful sources of documentation to help us in our analysis. We used: primary sources, secondary sources and digital sources.

The primary sources include regulations and official legislative acts that are directly related to the topic of Moldova's cooperation with the EU within the framework of the EaP. The results of the “Population and Housing Census of the Republic of Moldova” for 2004, 2014 and 2024, published by the “National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova” (NBSRM), provided information about the evolution of the main ethnic groups in the Republic of Moldova, as well as the number and share of the main ethnic groups in the total population of the Republic of Moldova. The statistical information from the NBSRM was the basis for analyzing the ethno-national realities, cleavages and identity disputes in the Moldovan society. This primary source and statistical data helped to analyze and compare the ethnic structure, including by districts in the Republic of Moldova.

The Official Journal of the European Union, the Official Gazette and the “*State Register of Legal Acts of the Republic of Moldova*” were the sources of origin of the database for the analytical dimension regarding the legislative framework. Another important part of the primary sources are the official documents of the Eastern Partnership and the European Union, including the Conclusions of the European Council, the Communications of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Joint Consultation Documents, the EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, the Joint Declarations adopted during the EaP Summits. The data obtained from the “Reports on the realization of the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Association Agreement Republic of Moldova – European Union” for different years helped to highlight the evolution of the cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the EU.

Secondary sources are basically alternative and complementary sources necessary for contextualization and referring to scholarly works. Various open academic databases (Open Access Library, SSRN, SSOAR, MPRA, DOAJ, ERIH+) were used in order to capitalize on existing theoretical and conceptual support, including comparative analogies with other studies.

The digital sources have constituted a documentation support for the research carried out at various stages, both qualitatively and quantitatively on the issue of cooperation of the Republic of Moldova with the EU through the EaP. Our attention was directed towards the official websites of the main EU institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Council, the European Parliament, the Eastern Partnership Program, as well as the official websites of the Republic of Moldova – the Presidency, the Government, the Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, etc. The reports “European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries” (EIIEaP) and: “Eastern Partnership Index” (EaPI) for the period 2011 - 2023 served as a database for analyzing the performance of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership.

This diversity of sources and the detailed way in which they are used supports a comprehensive analysis, ensuring well-founded answers to research questions and the validation of hypotheses. The integrated use of primary, secondary and digital sources of documentation throughout the entire academic research endeavor contributes to the achievement of all the assumed objectives and expected results.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The structure of this doctoral thesis aims to unfold the announced methodological framework and to achieve the assumed objectives regarding the analysis of the participation of the Republic of Moldova in the EaP through the prism of geopolitical antagonism and the shaping of public perceptions. The thesis begins by analyzing the contextual framework, assessing the launch and development of the Eastern Partnership, the results of the Republic of Moldova in the framework of the EaP throughout the entire period of existence of this cooperation platform, and

culminating with the influence of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership on relations with the Russian Federation.

The Introduction chapter contextualizes the research problematic, highlighting the importance of studying this topic. The originality of the academic approach is explained, as well as its topicality and relevance in relation to the research topic and the chosen methodology, in the current regional context. Our focus is also on explaining the relevance and usefulness of the research at both a theoretical and practical level.

Chapter 1. *Research Methodology and Sources of Documentation* is the methodological support of the academic logic of the thesis. The purpose of the research and the four specific objectives are presented and justified: to analyze the results of the Republic of Moldova's performance within the Eastern Partnership from a realistic perspective on the East-West disputes; to analyze the role of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union in influencing relations with the Russian Federation; to examine how the results of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union have been reflected in shaping public perceptions; and to identify a pattern of shaping public perceptions in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the existence of a relationship between identity cleavage and geopolitical choices. The chapter develops the research questions and working hypotheses on which the research is based. The research methods considered are: documentary analysis, historical analysis, comparative analysis, statistical analysis, as well as a case study.

Chapter 2 provides an in depth presentation of the *Contextual, Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Research*, as the title suggests. Here, the internal and geopolitical contextualization is analyzed, as well as the geopolitical context after the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, the period of independence of the Republic of Moldova and the political contextualization. Also, in this chapter the special relationship of the Republic of Moldova with Romania in the context of the choice of the European option is related. A retrospective of the Moldovan-Romanian cooperation through official visits at the level of heads of state.

Another important part of this chapter is the presentation of the ethno-national realities, cleavages and identity disputes in the Republic of Moldova. The research topic was analyzed from the theoretical perspective of Realism on the geopolitical orientation of the Republic of Moldova through the prism of competition and disputes between East and West. At the same time, the notions of the “Europeanization” of the East were conceptualized and the orientation of the Republic of Moldova towards the EU was highlighted. In this theoretical and conceptual chapter, the thesis of the neutrality of the Republic of Moldova: between powerlessness and real option was also presented.

Chapter 3. *The European Initiative “Eastern Partnership”* is dedicated to the European Initiative “Eastern Partnership”, where the idea of launching this program, the reaction and position of the EU members towards the EaP Initiative, the position of the countries participating in the cooperation format of this initiative, as well as the reactions or position of Russia towards

the launch of the European Initiative EaP were reported. The main elements of the EU's interest in the Eastern neighbors were highlighted. The chapter continues with the presentation and analysis of the EaP Summits, starting with the Prague Summit on May 7, 2009 and ending with the last EaP Summit in Brussels on December 15, 2021. The Eastern Partnership is now more than 15 years old. Within the broader anniversary framework, different events celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of the EaP were also analyzed, such as the Meeting of the High Officials of the Eastern Partnership States (Brussels, 11 April 2019), the “Eastern Partnership Ministerial Meeting on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the launch of the EaP” (Brussels, 13 May 2019), the “Anniversary High Level Conference of the Eastern Partnership” (Brussels, 14 May 2019), s. a. Within this chapter dedicated to the EaP initiative, the cooperation activity at the parliamentary level of the EaP, which is implemented within the “Parliamentary Assembly for Relations with the Eastern Partnership States” – Euronest, was also analyzed. The Euronest Parliamentary Assembly is the parliamentary institution of the EaP.

Chapter 4. *The Republic of Moldova in the Eastern Partnership* is a logical continuation of chapter three and is dedicated to the Republic of Moldova in the Eastern Partnership. The chapter begins with a contextual analysis of the events associated with the period of Moldova's accession to the EaP. Here we can mention domestic political events such as the “peaceful and violent” protests of April 7, 2009, the “Twitter Revolution” in the Republic of Moldova, the period following the April 2009 protests, and the actual accession of the Republic of Moldova to the Eastern Partnership Initiative.

A special section is dedicated to the analysis of the evolution of the Republic of Moldova within the EaP and its results within the EaP through the “Eastern Partnership Index” study for the period 2011-2023. Specifically here the dimensions of “Linkage”, “Approximation/Armonization” and “Management” are analyzed.

Chapter 5. *The Influence of the Republic of Moldova's Participation in the Eastern Partnership on Relations with the Russian Federation* is devoted to highlighting the influence of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership on relations with the Russian Federation. This chapter presents general aspects of Moldova's cooperation with the Russian Federation, namely the normative and institutional framework, the economic dimension of Moldovan-Russian relations, as well as the energy dimension. An important part is devoted to Russia's role in the Transnistrian conflict. The chapter continues with the presentation of the Russian perspective on Moldova's accession to the EaP and the signing of the AA with the EU. Also in this chapter, Russia's “hard” and “soft” power actions in Moldova in the context of the EaP were identified, presented and analyzed. The chapter concludes with the influence of Moldova's accession and participation in the Eastern Partnership on relations with the Russian Federation.

Chapter 6. *The Evolution and Shaping of Public Perceptions of the Geopolitical Choices of the Republic of Moldova in Relation to Identity Cleavages and the Results of the EAP* is analytically very important and encompasses the secondary dimension of our research topic: the

analysis of public perceptions of geopolitical choices and preferences in relation to identity and by reference to the tangible results of the EaP. Particular attention is paid to the development of a case study regarding the analysis of the perceptions, options and geopolitical preferences expressed by the citizens from the Transnistrian region and the ATUs of Gagauzia and Taraclia. The purpose of this investigation is to help us understand whether there is a direct relationship between the geopolitical choice option and the ethnicity of the communities in these regions.

The analysis of the public perceptions' evolution is focused towards the identification of possible behavioral patterns, both at the general population level and at the level of some identity communities. Our approach is focused on three main directions and levels of analysis:

- ✓ Public perception of Moldova's EU accession
- ✓ Perception of the antagonistic image of the geopolitical choice between the EU and the Russian Federation
- ✓ Perception of identity groups regarding the geopolitical choices of the Republic of Moldova Case study: perception modeling in the Gagauzian and Bulgarian community.

Finally, the paper concludes with a Conclusions chapter, which elaborates the set of conclusions, theoretical and applied contributions that the paper has from the academic point of view, as well as the Bibliography list.

## **Conclusions**

The central focus of our analysis is the cooperative relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU through the framework provided by the EaP, the analysis of the results of the Republic of Moldova within the EaP, through the complex dimensions and the analysis of geopolitical antagonism, the modeling of public perceptions in relation to the choice of geopolitical option. For more than 15 years, the Republic of Moldova has been an active participant in the EaP, and during this period, its relations with the Russian Federation have been negatively influenced by its rapprochement with the European Union. The involvement of the Republic of Moldova in the EaP has had significant consequences on Moldovan-Russian bilateral relations, and at various periods of time, Russia has reacted unsatisfactorily to this rapprochement. Each time the Republic of Moldova has advanced in the process of European integration, Russia has reacted with economic sanctions, embargoes or export bans, as ways to force the country to deviate from this path

In the first section of this chapter, we outline the conclusions that emerge **at the level of each research stage**, in order to subsequently present the contribution that our research had at a theoretical level, but also at an applied/practical level.

Our findings were validated by the established methods used, such as – documentary analysis, historical analysis, comparative analysis, statistical analysis, and a case study, confirming the initial hypotheses and highlighting significant correlations between the studied variables.



In *the first stage of the research*, which corresponds to the second chapter of the thesis, *Contextual, Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Research*, we analyzed in detail the contextual, theoretical and conceptual framework. The internal and geopolitical contextualization after the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR was highlighted, with a focus on the period of gaining independence of the Republic of Moldova. Contextualization, understanding and drawing the boundaries of analysis of the conceptual and theoretical framework has a very important role in the development of the research topic. The specificity and particularities of the reality of the Moldovan society require reference to the internal and external contextual knowledge.

Also within this stage of research, the special relationship of the Republic of Moldova with Romania was analyzed in the context of the European option. A retrospective of the Moldovan-Romanian cooperation through official visits at the level of heads of state was carried out. The analysis of the special relationship between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, in the context of an increasingly clear orientation towards the European Union, is essential, given that Romania is an important supporter of the Republic of Moldova in this process.

Another important part of this stage was dedicated to the presentation of the ethno-national realities, cleavages and identity disputes in the Republic of Moldova. The methodological arguments were supported by the results of the investigation during the research process: the structure, dynamics and ethno-national and linguistic realities influenced public perceptions of the geopolitical choices of the Republic of Moldova. The Moldovan society turned out to be not only highly diverse, but also one in which communities had diametrically opposed geopolitical preferences. There is thus a close link between identity and preference for the state's foreign relations. The identity cleavage reflects geopolitical competition and vice versa, the competition between East and West is reflected in the dynamics of geopolitical choices of identity communities in this state on the periphery of two geopolitical worlds.

Our premise was confirmed. Thus, the Russophone population (ethnic and Russian-speaking, the latter being a much larger category) tends to support rapprochement with the Russian Federation and is less favorable to integration into the European Union. At the level of conceptual analysis and in order to clarify the link between geopolitical constraints and domestic societal realities, we appealed to a debate that was centered on the thesis of the neutrality of the Republic of Moldova so much present in Moldovan society. The approach rather illustrated a need of the Republic of Moldova to guarantee and respect its statehood in a complicated geopolitical context of a competition between the Russian Federation and the West and in which the Republic of Moldova hoped to be less involved.

*The second stage*, represented by the introductory-descriptive and explanatory level of analysis of the EU Eastern Partnership initiative, corresponds to Chapter 3, *The European Initiative "The Eastern Partnership"*, where the idea of launching this program, the reaction and position of EU members towards the EaP Initiative, the position of the countries participating in the cooperation format towards its launch, the reactions and position of Russia towards the launch of

the European Initiative EaP, were reported. The main elements of the EU's interest in the Eastern Neighbors were highlighted. The identified role of this analysis was also to contextualize the path and results achieved by the Republic of Moldova in the framework of the EaP.

The Republic of Moldova is a geostrategic point of interest for major geopolitical actors, such as the European Union and the Russian Federation. The post-Soviet region, which also includes the Republic of Moldova, is quite particular, and for this reason, the European Union approaches it in a different way. The Eastern Partnership is part of a specific component of the European Neighborhood Policy. Poland and Sweden were the initiators of the official proposal to create an EaP. The aim of this initiative, supported by Poland and Sweden, was to strengthen relations with its Eastern European neighbors, putting them in a distinct approach compared to its neighbors in the Mediterranean area. The authors of this proposal believed that these six countries deserved different treatment within the ENP. The parliamentary dimension of the EaP, which is realized through the Parliamentary Assembly for Relations with the Eastern Partnership States – Euronest, the parliamentary institution of the Eastern Partnership, was also analyzed during this research phase.

***The third stage*** of the research, the analysis of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the EaP, the results of the EaP and the influence resulting from this journey are presented in Chapter 4. *The Republic of Moldova in the Eastern Partnership*. It is a logical continuation of chapter three and is dedicated to the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership. The importance of this research topic increases considerably in the context in which the European Union's Eastern neighbors and partners, including the Republic of Moldova, are influenced by a major actor on the international geopolitical scene, the Russian Federation. This influence generates instability and uncertainty in the region, negatively affecting the security and stability of the European Union's eastern border. Here we can mention domestic political events such as the “peaceful and violent” protests of April 7, 2009, the “Twitter Revolution” in the Republic of Moldova, the period following the April 2009 protests and Moldova's actual accession to the Eastern Partnership Initiative.

A significant part of the research conducted in this phase represents the evolution of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership and its results within the EaP through the “Eastern Partnership Index” study for the period 2011-2023. More specifically, the dimensions “Linkage”, “Approximation/Armonization” and “Management” were analyzed.

In ***the fourth stage***, found in Chapter 5, *The influence of the Republic of Moldova's Participation in the Eastern Partnership on Relations with the Russian Federation*, the influence of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership on relations with the Russian Federation was analyzed. This chapter presents general aspects of Moldova's cooperation with the Russian Federation, namely the normative and institutional framework, the economic dimension of Moldovan-Russian relations, as well as the energy dimension. Relations between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation are based on an extensive legal framework, consisting of

some 162 bilateral documents regulating cooperation in numerous areas of common interest. The Republic of Moldova has signed agreements with the Russian Federation in sectors such as science, culture, property rights, training of officers in military educational institutions, financial and banking relations, legal assistance and cooperation in the fields of civil, family and criminal law, as well as in the areas of standardization, metrology, certification, transport, consular and air services.

Moscow's policies aimed at consolidating its post-Soviet sphere of influence and limiting the rapprochement of Eastern states with the European Union are evident in numerous frozen conflicts and destabilization strategies.

An important part was devoted to Russia's role in the Transnistrian conflict. From the outset, cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation was marked by two major problems: Russia's illegal military presence and the Transnistrian conflict.

This chapter also identified, presented and analyzed Russia's "hard" and "soft" power actions in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the EaP. The Russian Federation is taking significant actions to position itself as a global actor, launching a more aggressive foreign policy to achieve its geopolitical and geostrategic goals. In order to achieve its goals, Russia uses a variety of instruments, including hard and soft power, as well as hybrid warfare strategies.

*The fifth stage* of the research, which is very important from an analytical point of view, includes the analysis of public perceptions regarding geopolitical options and preferences in relation to identity and by referring to the tangible results of the EaP. This stage is found in chapter six, *Evolution and Shaping of Public Perceptions Regarding the Geopolitical Choices of the Republic of Moldova in Relation to Identity Cleavages and the Results of the EaP*, and here the evolution and modeling of public perceptions regarding the geopolitical choices of the Republic of Moldova in relation to identity cleavages and the results of the EaP were analyzed. In this chapter, we proposed to analyze the evolution of public perceptions in the Republic of Moldova regarding geopolitical options, approaching them from the perspective of the historical method of analysis. An essential aspect is the dual and often antagonistic perspective of these geopolitical options, which manifest themselves as true existential dilemmas for a society located on the border between East and West. The Republic of Moldova is located on the meeting point between the EU/NATO and Russia's sphere of influence, and this geographical positioning places it in a complex situation. In addition, the Russian Federation continues to consider the Republic of Moldova part of its zone of influence, having a "right of claim" over this territory, invoking the Soviet legacy and the close historical and cultural ties between the two countries. This deepens the internal division in Moldovan society, where there are contradictory visions between pro-European and pro-Russian options. On the other hand, integration into the European Union is perceived by one part of the population as an opportunity for economic development, prosperity and democratic stability, while another part, influenced by historical and economic ties with Russia, sees rapprochement with Moscow as a safer solution for maintaining sovereignty and internal stability.

Thus, the Republic of Moldova faces a geopolitical paradox in which decisions regarding its future can determine the direction of its evolution, in the context of external pressures and internal division between pro-Western and pro-Eastern political orientations.

Particular attention was given to the completion of a case study on analyzing the perceptions, options and geopolitical preferences expressed by the citizens of the Transnistrian region and of the ATUs of Gagauzia and Taraclia.

The evolution of public perceptions in the Republic of Moldova in the period 2009-2024 revealed *a modeling in relation to the domestic political reality, the geopolitical context, the level of political rapprochement with the EU or the Russian Federation, the tangible results of the EaP, in particular the implementation of the Association Agreements, but also in accordance with the demographic structure of the population of the Republic of Moldova.*

The result of our research on public perceptions in relation to EU accession by introducing the identity component in the analysis is as anticipated and confirms the hypothesis of our research that *public perceptions expressed in relation to geopolitical orientation were shaped from identity fragmentation*, and not only from other forms of fragmentation and polarization on political, social-economic, habitat or educational level criteria.

The research methodology allowed to clarify several essential aspects of the scientific approach. The methodological argumentation led to and conferred a very high relevance to the realized research and justified the general aim of the thesis.

### **Thesis results and hypothesis validation**

The results of the thesis are in line with the assumed objectives and clearly answer the formulated research questions. The overall aim of the research was to analyze the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union reflected in the results of the European Partnership and through the lens of shaping domestic public perceptions in the context of geopolitical disputes between the Russian Federation and the European Union.

The first objective, related to exploring and analyzing the results of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership from a realist perspective on the East-West disputes, was achieved through a detailed analysis of the evolution of the Republic of Moldova within the EaP initiative, through an approach based on the realist theory of international relations. The main idea was to explore and analyze official data of the European Union and the Republic of Moldova, as well as information from various international organizations, in order to better understand how these geopolitical relations have influenced the country's course through the lens of competition and rivalry between the major powers.

The second objective, on analyzing the role of the Republic of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union in influencing relations with the Russian Federation, was achieved through a detailed investigation of the effects and influence of Moldova's rapprochement with the

European Union on relations with the Russian Federation. Thus, it was proposed to explore to what extent a rapprochement with the EU has had an impact on traditional relations with Russia and whether, in this process, the Republic of Moldova has experienced a deterioration of ties with the Russian Federation.

The third objective, related to examining how the results of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union have been reflected in shaping public perceptions, was achieved by analyzing how the results of the Eastern Partnership have influenced public perceptions in Moldova. This analysis was possible only by resorting to research and opinion polls conducted by various institutes and organizations that carried out such studies over an extended period between 2009 and 2024.

The fourth objective, concerning the identification of a pattern of shaping public perceptions in the Republic of Moldova in the context of an existent relationship between identity cleavage and geopolitical choices, was achieved by exploring possible patterns of shaping public perceptions, with ethno-national and linguistic identity as the starting point, and tangentially also the cultural-religious one. In this sense, the realization of the given objective was based on the previous analyses and on the realization of specific case studies, focusing on the Transnistrian and ATU of Gagauzia regions. By realizing this objective, we verified to what extent the Russian-speaking, Gagauzian and Bulgarian communities showed different geopolitical preferences towards the external orientation of the Republic of Moldova.

As for the research questions, they were formulated in such a way as to contribute to the objectives of the paper and to allow for a detailed exploration of the Republic of Moldova's performance in the EaP through the lens of geopolitical antagonism and shaping of public perceptions.

### ***Validation of hypotheses***

Hypothesis 1 formulated in the framework of this research states that “*The Positive Results of the Republic of Moldova within the Eastern Partnership were decisively influenced geopolitically*”.

The data collected in the research validates this hypothesis. Our research confirms the validity of this hypothesis by analyzing the geopolitical context. The validation of the hypothesis is based on a detailed assessment of the changes in the European Union's foreign policy towards the Republic of Moldova during the period of its participation in the EaP. This included the analysis of EU strategic decisions, such as association agreements, which might reflect a deeper engagement and a change in attitude towards the Republic of Moldova, mainly in reaction to regional geopolitical developments. The geopolitical impact of external events (e.g. annexation of Crimea by Russia, crisis in Ukraine) on EU decisions regarding the Republic of Moldova was also studied.

Hypothesis 2 argues that “*The European course of the Republic of Moldova has not been a constant one, being influenced by the internal and external political choices of the rulers*”.

This hypothesis is validated by the results of the research, i.e. as a result of analyzing the internal governmental changes and political choices of the rulers. The validation of the hypothesis was based on a detailed analysis of internal political changes in the Republic of Moldova, including elections, changes of governments and foreign policy changes. These changes were correlated with developments in the European course of the Republic of Moldova. For example, we analyzed how the alternation between pro-European and pro-Russian parties has influenced the country's strategic direction, as well as changes in commitments to the European Union and the Eastern Partnership. Another example, validating the hypothesis, showed how during the periods when pro-European governments were in power, there were more significant advances in the field of European integration, such as the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU or the implementation of specific reforms.

Hypothesis 3 argues that “*Public perceptions of geopolitical choices have been shaped in relation to Eastern Partnership outcomes*”.

This hypothesis is partially validated by the research findings by investigating how the Republic of Moldova's progress within the EaP has influenced public perceptions of the country's geopolitical orientations. Partial validation of this hypothesis involved identifying a correlation between tangible results achieved in the framework of the EaP and changes in public perceptions of geopolitical choices, especially with regard to cooperation with and accession to the EU. By analyzing polling data and key events, it was possible to reveal whether public perceptions have been shaped by these external outcomes.

Hypothesis 4 argues that “*The identity cleavage in the Republic of Moldova profoundly marks the geopolitical choices and outcomes of the Eastern Partnership*”.

This hypothesis is validated by the findings of our research by conducting a detailed analysis of how the ethno-national, linguistic and identity realities of the population influence geopolitical choices and how these are reflected in the results of the EaP. In this case, it is observed that certain ethnic and linguistic communities in the Republic of Moldova, such as the Gagauzians and Bulgarians in the ATU of Gagauzia and Taraclia district, profoundly influence public perceptions and geopolitical choices of the Republic of Moldova. The validation of the hypothesis was possible through a complex approach, which included the analysis of identity factors and geopolitical preferences of these groups, as well as the interaction between them and the progress achieved in the framework of the EaP. Conducting a case study analyzing the evolution of public perceptions regarding the external orientation preferences and acceptance or rejection of a possible EU membership in the ATU of Gagauzia and Taraclia district can highlight the refusal of EU membership for mainly identity reasons. Thus, Gagauzians and Bulgarians in these regions tend to favor mainly the rapprochement with the Russian Federation, being less influenced by the results of the EaP or the benefits of the Republic of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union.

### **Limitations of the thesis and recommendations for further investigations**

Any scientific endeavor has certain limitations that may influence the applicability or generalizability of the results. In the case of the present research, the limitations identified are both methodological and contextual in nature, being related to its characteristics and the complexity of the thematic area addressed. The scientific research encountered several difficulties and the study presents some limitations that could be overcome in future investigations. One of the positive aspects was the sufficient access to relevant bibliographical sources, with most of the papers being available in electronic format. However, the interaction with the authorities, in order to obtain essential information for the research and to clarify some issues, had several disadvantages, due to the sensitive context of the region in which the Republic of Moldova is located.

Another shortcoming was the impossibility to accurately calculate the impact level of the Republic of Moldova's participation in the Eastern Partnership on its relations with the Russian Federation. Although initially the collaboration between the Republic of Moldova and Russia was close after gaining independence, it is currently not as strong, due to the influence of the EaP and the signing of the AA with the EU, which led to negative reactions from Russia and a gradual deterioration of bilateral relations. In addition, regional developments in the post-2022 period have substantially changed the geopolitical context, influencing international relations as well, which makes the analysis more complex and more difficult to predict accurately.

The limitations of the research were somewhat inherent, but require further clarification by calling for complex and interdisciplinary research on the geopolitical antagonism regarding the participation of the Republic of Moldova in the Eastern Partnership.

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