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From attraction to
Europeanisation –
Moldova's slow
movement towards
the EU

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From attraction to Europeanisation – Moldova's slow movement towards the EU¹

Abstract

Since 2009, Moldova has been the strongest case of the EU's model power in the neighbourhood. The EU has increasingly penetrated Moldovan domestic politics and policy-making, practicing external governance through growing linkages and assistance and targeted use of conditionality. However, Moldova has yet to prove its ability to implement large-scale reforms, for example in the justice sector, which have been slowed down by the presidential election stalemate and infighting within the ruling coalition. The EU faces a complex task to simultaneously manage the high expectations of Moldovans, be more demanding and critical towards the government's reform efforts, and maintain its power of attraction. Moldova is likely to stay on the European integration course, but in the coming months and years, the EU-Moldova relationship will be tested by further domestic turbulence in Moldova and slow progress in responding to the expectations of the other side in both Brussels and Chisinau. As Moldova may be heading towards another early parliamentary election and/or change of coalition, the EU should not prejudge any outcome, but maintain a high level of support, work for further Europeanisation of the whole political landscape and, *if* a new government were to emerge, push it to continue with reforms.

¹ I am grateful to the officials, diplomats and politicians of Moldova, the EU and its member states who met me to discuss the issues addressed in this paper in Chisinau on 12-15 September and Brussels on 29-30 September.

Introduction

Over the past couple of years, Moldova has appeared as the brightest spot in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Its European orientation is the strongest in the region, supported by a vast majority of the population and all major political groups. It is the only Eastern Partnership (EaP) country with a positive development of democracy recently,² while its economy is recovering from the deep recession of 2009³ and the business environment has improved.⁴ It has generated a lot of goodwill on the EU's side, expressed by frequent high-level visits and meetings, abundance of positive statements and considerable increase of assistance.

Yet the success story that the EU has eagerly helped to construct, not least because of lack of positive developments elsewhere in the region, is counterproductive if it receives limited support from reforms on the ground. This paper argues that it remains a major challenge for the EU to translate its strong model power and increased linkages with Moldova into actual Europeanisation of the country. As the EU becomes increasingly involved in Moldova's domestic developments, it has to be fair and critical towards the leadership in order not to undermine its attractiveness and the country's European orientation. The patience and determination of both sides is under test as the progress of reforms in Moldova is slow and the EU offers limited rewards for the fulfilment of its conditions.

This paper deliberately leaves aside the question of the Transnistrian conflict – not to deny that it is one of the major challenges faced by Moldova, but to underscore that it does not prevent Moldova from Europeanising its political system, the economy and society. The closer Moldova comes to the EU, the more motivated both sides will be to solve the conflict. Moldova needs not be reminded at this stage that it cannot join the EU without settling the Transnistrian conflict first⁵ – this is the case, but it

has much work to do before possibly getting close to EU membership, and that work simultaneously brings the settlement closer.

In the following, I will first discuss shortly the concepts of model power and external governance that are helpful for understanding the relationship between the EU and Moldova. I will then take a look back at the events of spring 2009 in which the EU played an ambivalent role, and which nevertheless became a positive turning point in EU-Moldova relations, exposing the strength and uncontrolled nature of EU model power. The rest of the paper will examine the strengthening EU governance in Moldova as well as the limits and obstacles to the country's European integration process.

Model power and external governance

The EU's influence on Moldova can be illuminated by the concepts of model power and external governance. Both are closely related to the concept of normative power, which has become so popular in both academic literature analysing EU foreign policy and the EU's own rhetoric that it shapes the Union's policy agenda and creates strong expectations as to what and how it should do in its external relations. Model power, or the power of example and attraction, can be regarded the strongest form of the EU's normative power. This is to say that the EU's power in relation to outsiders is partly built on the perceived legitimacy and attractiveness of the way it functions internally and of the norms that it pursues in its external action. It has even been argued that the internal model, or what the EU is, is the "most important factor shaping the international role of the EU".⁶

The effectiveness of the model power has been most evident in the process of enlargement, but it also has strong relevance in the Eastern neighbourhood where the appeal of EU membership has not vanished even though the EU has made no commitments or promises in this regard. (Model power is an important feature that distinguishes the EU's relations with the Eastern neighbourhood from the Southern dimension of the ENP where the EU lacks a similar attraction.)

While model power is just one of the mechanisms of normative power, referring to the passive

2 Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2011*; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2010*.

3 In 2009, Moldova's GDP contracted by 6 %, followed by a 6,9 % growth in 2010 and an estimated 5,5 % growth in 2011 (Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report Moldova*, October 2011).

4 Moldova's position in the *Doing Business 2012* – ranking has improved from the 99th to the 81st. Source: World Bank and International Financial Corporation, <http://www.doing-business.org/data/exploreeconomies/moldova>

5 Ruprecht Polenz, head of the foreign affairs committee of the German Bundestag, and his Polish counterpart Andrzej Halicki, made such unhelpful statements during their visits to Chisinau respectively in late August and early September (reported by *Info-Prim Neo*, 27.8.2011, and *Moldpres*, 8.9.2011).

6 Manners 2002, 252.

and to some extent unintended spread of norms,⁷ the enlargement and neighbourhood policies are just as much about *active* promotion of the EU's norms and values. The attraction of EU model functions as a source of *power* that enables the EU to extend its internal model beyond its borders. Although largely benevolent and voluntary, the projection and promotion of European norms and values is a key form of EU power in the Eastern neighbourhood. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) rhetoric highlights “partnership” that is based on the “needs, capacities and reform objectives” of each neighbour,⁸ but the relationship between the EU and the neighbours is strongly asymmetrical, with the EU setting the underlying norms and conditions. The EU practices a soft kind of imperial politics which has been characterised by a “strong and ever growing convergence of norms and values”⁹

The asymmetry has been largely seen as legitimate in the context of enlargement where eventual accession has legitimised the “soft imperialism” exercised by the EU. The ENP, lacking the legitimising effect of enlargement, has arguably revealed “the uglier face of the Union’s normative power as one based on domination”.¹⁰ However, beyond enlargement, the normative agenda has not been implemented consistently, but the EU has often favoured stability and security over democracy and change.¹¹ The tendency to prioritise stability was evident, for example, in the aftermath of the April 2009 protests in Moldova (see more below).

The concept of external governance attempts to grasp both the passive and active aspects of the EU's role in the neighbourhood, while being more helpful than the concept of normative power for analyzing the *mechanisms* of EU power. “Governance” in general refers to the dispersion of authority and the increased complexity of social regulation, thus characterising aptly the governing of the EU that takes place without a single authority and in the framework of a complex and multi-layered set of rules and norms. It points to the multiplicity of actors in public life and the blurring boundaries between the international, national and sub-national levels, and between public and private spheres. Shared norms

and values have a special role in the functioning of governance: as distinct from the compulsory nature of domestic laws and formal international agreements, governance is exercised, to a considerable extent, through rules that are non-binding in a formal or legal sense.¹²

The concept may refer both to the *practice* of governance and to *systems* of governance. The distinction between these two meanings is a key to understanding many of the problems that appear in the EU's neighbourhood policy: the fact that the Union *practices* governance over its neighbours without including the neighbours fully in its *system* of governance is a major source of tension.¹³ Aiming at the adoption of or approximation to the EU system by the partner countries, the ENP can be viewed as an external dimension of the EU's internal politics or the “externalisation of EU governance”.¹⁴ It seeks to extend the EU's norms and to practice governance over neighbours through a mixture of partly overlapping instruments such as model power, increased linkages, conditionality and socialisation. The existence of model power is of key importance, as it softens conditionality, makes closer linkages more desirable and tunes the actors involved to socialisation.

Uncontrollable attraction

The EU's strong and to some extent unintended and uncontrollable model power was exposed in the context of the so-called Twitter revolution that took place in Moldova in April 2009. The spring of 2009 marked a turning point in EU-Moldova relations and therefore deserves closer scrutiny here. The parliamentary elections held in April 2009 gave rise to mass demonstrations by mostly younger generation who perceived of the eight-year rule of the so-called Communist party as unjust, oppressive, ineffective and merely paying lip-service to democratic values and reforms. The demonstrations were smashed by the police with heavy hand and hundreds were detained,¹⁵ which further fuelled the claims of protesters. The opposition declared the election victory of the Communist party, led by then president Voronin, fraud and called for repeat elections.

7 For an overview of the mechanisms of normative power, see Forsberg 2011.

8 European Commission and High Representative, COM(2011) 303, 25.5.2011.

9 Zielonka 2008, 471.

10 Haukkala 2008, 12.

11 See Youngs 2010.

12 Cf. Weber et al. 2004.

13 Raik 2006.

14 E.g. Lavenex 2004 (681); Gänzle 2009 (1718).

15 Council of Europe, 17 July 2009, CommDH(2009)27 <https://wcd.coe.int/wcd/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1469277>

The EU's relations with Moldova had deepened after the 2004 and especially 2007 enlargements that made Moldova a direct neighbour of the EU. The "Communist" leadership had made some efforts to develop a reform agenda in the framework of the ENP and received considerable assistance from the EU. The party propped up its support by control over public media and harassment of the opposition. It was constantly criticised by the EU for its undemocratic practices and responded with small improvements. In spite of all its flaws, though, it should be noted that Voronin's Moldova was more democratic than for example Ukraine prior to the Orange revolution of 2004.

The OSCE-led international observation mission recognised the elections of April 2009 as generally free and fair, although it pointed to problems such as "undue administrative interference" and "lack of public confidence".¹⁶ The EU had thus no ground to support the protesters' demand for repeat elections. Moreover, an early election did not seem a likely way out of the political stalemate, as the Communists were expected to remain the largest party, and the opposition was fragmented and lacked a uniting leader.

During the crisis, the EU focused its efforts on facilitating dialogue between the main political forces, with the EUSR for Moldova being active on the ground and HR Solana paying a visit to underline the EU's messages. The immediate aims of the EU were to enable the election of a new president in the parliament, which required a qualified majority (61 votes out of 101) and thus votes from both the Communists and the opposition, and to ensure investigation of the human rights violations committed against protesters. However, the political atmosphere was too tense and mistrust between the two main political camps too high for a constructive dialogue. According to the constitution, the failure to elect a president led to the dissolution of parliament and early parliamentary elections held in July 2009. The April protests and their crack-down were a shock for the society that launched new political dynamics, culminating in the establishment of the "Alliance for European Integration" (AEI) that reached a slim majority in the new parliament.

The Twitter Revolution marked a strong turn of Moldova towards Europe, with high expectations of first the protesters and the opposition and then the new leadership for EU support. Like in

the case of Ukraine in late 2004, many in the EU would have preferred stability. During the political crisis, the EU did not promote change of leadership; its guiding principles were reconciliation, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. The EU was not able to prevent mistreatment of protesters, but Europe's pressure and involvement was essential for promoting the release of the detained protesters and investigation of human rights violations. The EU and other European organisations also played an important role in channelling the political protests in a peaceful way and ensuring respect for the Moldovan constitution and law, e.g. by assisting the organisation of new elections in July. The eventual change of leadership was motivated by Europe's power of attraction, but it happened in spite of EU policy, not because of it.

Strengthening of EU governance

Once the strongly pro-European AEI came to power in September 2009, Moldova became the strongest case of EU model power in the neighbourhood. The EU responded to the change with more active engagement, including additional assistance and launch of negotiations on an association agreement and visa liberalisation. The EU's offer was by and large copied from its policy for Ukraine, but the process was much faster: association agreement talks started with Ukraine in March 2007, more than two years after the Orange Revolution, and with Moldova in January 2010, four months after the change of leadership. While Ukraine had had to struggle for each new benefit and each step that took it closer to the EU, such as a new model of association agreement and a visa dialogue aiming at visa free travel, Moldova profited from the path-breaking work done by Ukraine. The EU's assistance to Moldova was also relatively larger considering the small size of the country. Moldova's short-term expectations were more realistic, but the longer-term motivation for pursuing an ambitious reform agenda and taking the EU's conditions seriously was the hope of one day joining the club.

The AEI has formulated its European integration agenda largely in accordance with the EU's expectations. The EU provides a model of development that is attractive in the eyes of the population and that the leadership seeks to emulate. All major political forces support the EU orientation, although the Communist party that is currently in the opposi-

16 OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, 16 June 2009
<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/moldova/37568>

tion was not that committed to actual EU-oriented reforms during its rule. A strong majority of the population has consistently supported EU accession over the past years, and the image of the EU among the Moldovans is overwhelmingly positive.¹⁷

Linkages between the EU and Moldova have increased, which is favourable for the democratisation process.¹⁸ Annual bilateral assistance has almost doubled in five years, from 40 Million EUR in 2007 to a planned 79 Million in 2011, and is set to further increase to 100 Million by 2013.¹⁹ The EU is the largest trade partner of Moldova, with a share of 54 % of total imports and 49 % of total exports in 2010.²⁰ The EU's autonomous trade preferences granted to Moldova in 2008 (that is, during the Communist rule) and extended in 2011 represent the most beneficial conditions for trade with the EU among the EaP countries.

The EU penetrates Moldova's domestic politics and policy-making in many ways. It has played an important role in managing domestic political conflicts and facilitating relations between the coalition and the opposition and, even more importantly, inside the coalition, helping to keep the parties together amidst fierce rivalries and disagreements. The political elite, including the governing coalition as well as the opposition, has generally open and good relations with local representatives of the EU and the member states in Chisinau.²¹ It is willing to take advice and regularly consults the EU on topical issues. Since January 2010, it has profited from high-level policy advisers from different EU member states working at Moldovan government institutions.²² In February 2010, the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine, EUBAM (launched in 2005 with headquarters in Odessa) opened a branch office in Chisinau and took a more active role in improving the customs and border guard services in Moldova.

Negotiations on the EU-Moldova association agreement have proceeded more smoothly with Moldova than with the other EaP partners. The

EU side has praised the good preparation and constructive attitude of the Moldovan negotiators. The political part of the negotiations was recently completed; negotiations continue in the field of freedom, security and justice, and on economic and sectoral cooperation. Negotiations on the technically more demanding DCFTA part are set to open by the end of the year²³ and could perhaps be concluded in 2013. The Moldovan government has also worked faster than the other EaP countries on implementing the conditions for visa liberalisation, the goal of visa-free travel to the EU being one of the most important EU-related issues for the population. Ukraine and Moldova are the two frontrunners in this field: Ukraine started visa dialogue with the EU in autumn 2008 and received a visa liberalisation action plan, defining all the technical conditions, in November 2010. Moldova followed with a visa dialogue in June 2010 and an action plan in January 2011, and has by now passed Ukraine in this process.²⁴

Both the EU and Moldovan sides are producing regular detailed progress reports on the association agreement talks and the related reforms, preparations for a DCFTA and implementation of the visa liberalisation action plan. There is a considerable degree of norms transfer – to mention just a few concrete examples in different fields, the EU's requirements have led to the introduction of biometric passports, Moldova's accession to the Energy Community Treaty, ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, imminent conclusion of a common aviation area agreement that will liberalise air transport etc. The visa liberalisation process has worked as a particularly effective tool of norms transfer, covering different aspects of the rule of law.²⁵

The organisation of the European integration work draws on the models and experience of the pre-accession period of the Eastern EU member states. Moldova (along with Georgia) has created one of the best EU coordination mechanisms among the EaP countries, although there is still much room for improvement.²⁶ A governmental commission for European integration oversees the association

17 IDIS "Viitorul", March 2011.

18 On Western linkages and democratisation, see Levitsky and Way 2005.

19 Information provided by the EU delegation to Moldova.

20 European Commission, DG Trade, Factsheet on Moldova, 8.6.2011. http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113419.pdf

21 Interviews by the author in Chisinau, 12-15 September 2011.

22 The number of advisers is currently 13, with two more to be nominated.

23 Joint Declaration of the Warsaw Eastern Partnership Summit, 29-30 September 2011.

24 International Renaissance Foundation and Open Society Foundations 2011.

25 European Commission and High Representative, SEC(2011) 1075, 16.9.2011.

26 International Renaissance Foundation and Open Society Foundations 2011.

agreement negotiating team and working groups on visa liberalisation, DCFTA and human rights dialogue. Relevant line ministries are increasingly involved, with the prime minister and foreign minister, who is also deputy premier and minister for European integration, playing an important role in pushing them to do more. The government seeks to improve coordination between ministries on EU related issues, which is crucial for more efficient policy-making and implementation.

Altogether, Moldova is increasingly treated by the EU like a candidate country and seeks to behave like one. It hopes that such behaviour will eventually lead to being accepted as a candidate for full membership. Furthermore, a majority of the population actually believes that Moldova will become an EU member in the next 5-10 years.²⁷ At the same time, the EU needs the Moldovan “success story” for its internal reasons, to inject belief in itself – in the words of the Polish premier Donald Tusk, “Let the determination and courage of Prime Minister Filat and the determination of the entire country of Moldova be an important sign for all those sceptics and grumblers who /.../ question the very essence and foundations of the Union.”²⁸

Slow progress, limited conditionality

In spite of the positive dynamics, the expectations are too high on both sides. Moldova has been a success story when measured by the model power of the EU and the commitment and goodwill of the Moldovans. The power of attraction has given the EU unique leverage, facilitating norms transfer and strengthening external governance. However – what sounds very familiar from the enlargement process – assurances of commitments and lists of adopted laws and reform agendas do not automatically translate into the implementation of reforms. European integration is a layer of governmental activity that seems to stand apart from social reality.

On the other hand, the EU has also been slow in moving forward with the visa liberalisation and opening of DCFTA talks. While in Moldova the foreign ministry has the lead in the integration process and works hard to mobilise other ministries to

do their share, on the EU side it is the officials in charge of external relations who sometimes find it hard to push their colleagues in the fields of trade and visa policy, for whom Moldova is not a priority, to move ahead faster in response to the efforts of the Moldovan side.²⁹ Political leadership and commitment are constantly needed on both sides to keep the technocratic work going.

Weakness of the justice sector is one of the main hurdles for Moldova's reform process. The EU has repeatedly questioned the qualification and independence of judges, the activities of the Centre for Combating Economic Crime and Corruption etc. The EU is applying conditionality to push the justice sector reform forward: it has made around 50 million EUR of budget support conditional upon the adoption of a reform strategy. In order to ensure the EU funding, the Moldovan government adopted a draft justice reform strategy in September and aims to have it approved by the parliament by November. So far, the discussions in the parliament have been difficult, so the EU's pressure and advice is much needed for advancing the reform.

Another important example of EU conditionality is anti-discrimination legislation. The issue of ensuring protection of minorities, including sexual minorities, has aroused friction and hostile public reactions in many post-communist countries where the legacy of Soviet-era criminalisation of homosexuality has been combined with conservative orthodox (e.g. Moldova) or catholic (e.g. Poland) religion. The Moldovan government withdrew the anti-discrimination law from the parliament ahead of the local elections of June 2011, so as to prevent it from being used as a campaign weapon against the coalition. However, it is under strong EU pressure to pass the law: anti-discrimination legislation is included in the action plan for visa liberalisation, and the EU has threatened to block progress towards visa-free travel unless the law is adopted.

It remains to be seen how strictly the EU will apply conditionality in these and similar cases. The EU has supported justice sector reform in other neighbouring countries where the state of democracy and rule of law is far behind Moldova, such as Azerbaijan.³⁰ If Moldova remains ahead of other neighbours in these areas, it will be entitled to additional support in accordance with the “more for more” principle of the ENP, even if it fails the

27 IDIS “Viitorul”, March 2011. According to the survey, 52 % of the population believed that Moldova would join the EU in 10 years, whereas only 8 % said that it would never join.

28 Statement of Donald Tusk, Krynica, 7.9.2011 http://www.premier.gov.pl/en/press_centre/news/prime_minister_discusses_europ,7667/

29 Interviews by the author in Chisinau, 12-15 September 2011.

30 ENPI Annual Action Programme http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/documents/aap/2008/ec_aap-2008_az_en.pdf

more ambitious expectations. The EU has to draw a fine balance between pressing Moldova to do more, while applying the principle of differentiation in a fair manner. As long as it does not offer a membership perspective, conditionality is of limited value because of the lack of substantial rewards.³¹ However, suspension of aid and other benefits can be helpful in promoting concrete reform measures. Several experts have called on the EU to establish a stronger link between the benefits that it offers and the conditions that the target country must meet.³²

The perpetual presidential election

Political instability has been a major factor slowing down Moldova's reform process, provoking comparisons to the chronic and paralyzing political infighting in Ukraine after the Orange Revolution.³³ The polarisation of the political landscape, with the coalition currently having 59 seats in the parliament and the opposition Communist party 42 seats, has continued to block the election of president. This deadlock can in principle be addressed in at least four ways: agreement between the coalition and the opposition on a compromise candidate, early parliamentary elections, change of coalition, or constitutional reform that changes the procedure of electing president. Now that a new date of presidential election has been set for 18 November 2011, none of these options can be excluded. Whatever solution the Moldovan politicians choose to pursue, there is need for the EU's involvement as a guardian of the rule of law and facilitator between the parties.

Agreement between the government and opposition on a common candidate has proved very difficult to reach and there is probably not enough political will on either side to make compromises. As for the second option, there were early elections already in November 2010, which failed to decisively change the balance of power. Another try could again lead to a similar composition of the parliament and would be costly, risky for all the parties and unpopular among the citizens. Thirdly, a new coalition between the Communists and the Liberal-Democrats (the largest member of the current coalition) would have the necessary number of votes for electing president, but such a change

of coalition would be regarded as treason by many Liberal-Democrat voters and has been repeatedly ruled out by the party leader, prime minister Vlad Filat.

Finally, a constitutional reform via referendum was tried with no success in 2010, but the issue remains on the agenda. There is considerable support among the politicians as well as citizens for moving to the election of president by popular vote. However, in the current condition of political crisis a constitutional reform easily becomes an instrument in political battles and would thus preferably be undertaken after the crisis has been solved. Strengthening of the institution of president is unadvisable in the light of democratisation studies which suggest that a strong presidential rule is conducive to authoritarian tendencies.

Since Moldova is a parliamentary republic according to the constitution, the failure to elect a president has had no dramatic effects on the functioning of the state. The European integration agenda, including association agreement negotiations and work on visa facilitation, has not been directly impacted by the presidential stalemate. However, the prolonged crisis has consumed much time and energy of the political elite and created serious tensions inside the coalition. The fragility of the coalition has acted as a brake on some of the most difficult and important reforms such as judiciary reform and fight against corruption. Deep-rooted corrupt practices and complex vested interests can only be challenged by bold leadership and require a degree of political stability that has been missing in Moldova.

The danger of partiality

The prolonged political instability combined with the EU's strong presence on the domestic political scene places the EU in a delicate position. It has had good reasons to offer strong support and encouragement to the current leadership for being more ambitious and determined than its Communist predecessors. It is also rightly concerned about possible implications of a possible return to power of the Communists, fearing that the country would fall back to the snail-paced reforms and uncertainty characteristic of pre-April 2009. With a possible fall of the AEI, Moldova might also enter the next stage of "Ukrainisation", meaning a setback of democratisation and questioning of the strong European orientation.

The Communist leadership has recently flirted

31 Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2010.

32 E.g. Solonenko and Shapovalova 2011; see also Raik 2011.

33 E.g. Litra 2011.

with the option of the “Eurasian Union” proposed by the Russian PM Putin.³⁴ This should not be read as an indication of an actual political agenda if the Communists came to power – in fact, they would not be likely to turn their back to Europe. However, it does remind us that there are alternative models of development and sources of support for Moldova,³⁵ that the Russian orientation is a real alternative for the supporters of the Communists, and that the party lacks a strong, principled commitment to European orientation. At the same time, the Communists remain the largest party in Moldova and may well return to power through democratic political process – this is of course up to the electorate and – since the Communists would need a coalition partner to form government – the other parties to decide. The EU is bound to respect any outcome reached through a democratic procedure.

It is worth reminding that until April 2009 the EU treated the Communists as the only possible base for a stable government. While the EU was critical at the time of the limitations of political freedom, the high level of corruption and many other problems in the country, it cooperated with the government and did not promote change of power. It respected the Communists as legitimate leaders even in the aftermath of the crackdown of the April 2009 protests. It was only after the balance of power had changed and the AEI came to power that the EU started to favour them as the only possible reform-minded coalition in Moldova.

In spite of the fresh determination, the record of the current government is not that fantastic, and the permanent political crisis and public quarrelling of the coalition partners is causing deep frustration and resentment among the population. The EU is seen by many as being on the side of the coalition and praising it excessively, while downplaying the problems. The image of partiality undermines the EU's support and credibility among the population. The EU's support rate, while still high, has decreased from 77 % in 2008 to 62 % in 2011.³⁶ It is likely that, since the EU has gained an important role in Moldovan politics and is a strong supporter of the government, public dissatisfaction with the government is reflected in public support for the EU.

While the AEI has been keen to seek advice from the EU and accept a reform agenda prescribed by Brussels, it has neglected ties with the domestic public. Better public communication is important in particular when it comes to less popular reforms such as the anti-discrimination law. Putting the blame for unpopular decisions on the EU (which is an all too common practice in the member states and candidate countries) weakens support for the European orientation. The EU's support is needed to improve public dissemination and communication on the European integration –related issues.

In a longer perspective, democracy can flourish in any country only if it is “the only game in town” – that is, if all major political groups are committed to democratic rules. The EU therefore has to support the Europeanisation of the whole political landscape and cooperate with all political forces. It should retain impartiality and objectivity with regard to political developments in the country and avoid giving artificial respiration to a dysfunctional government. In this way it can make the negative scenarios less likely and a possible change of power a less threatening option.

Conclusion: steering through turbulence

The EU-Moldova relationship is entering a more realistic phase, with less high-level publicity and boost and more work on rather boring technical issues related to trade and visas – that is, further spread of the EU's external governance. A degree of disillusionment due to slow progress on both sides is unavoidable. The challenge for Moldova is to move from good rhetoric to more efficient implementation of the reform agenda. This is not an easy task, especially as the country is going through turbulent times in domestic politics. Even if the current coalition were to fall apart, the EU needs to maintain its strong support to the country, encourage further reforms and avoid prejudging possible new political configurations.

Contrary to the expectations and even beliefs of many Moldovans, there is currently no EU membership perspective in sight. So far Moldova has been attracted by a distant possibility, a “perspective of a perspective”, but this cannot motivate and inspire the country in a longer term. Furthermore, contrary to the promises of the current leadership, visa-free travel with the EU will not be accomplished next year, but may take considerably longer

34 Moldova.org 12.10.2011, <http://politicom.moldova.org/news/moldovan-officials-not-interested-in-putins-eurasian-union-225783-eng.html>

35 Popescu and Wilson 2009.

36 Bordeianu 2011, 35.

time. The conclusion of the association agreement will be a major symbolic achievement, but even that will not be reached before year 2013. There is also a danger that the EU, for its internal reasons, will fail to move forward quickly on the DCFTA and visa liberalisation. It must avoid the temptation to invent new hurdles and conditions, motivated by a general reluctance to enhance free movement of people, which reflects the growth of euro-sceptic and xenophobic sentiments in the EU – the postponement of Bulgaria's and Romania's access to the Schengen area is a worrying signal in this regard.

As Moldova moves forward on the EU path, the EU will sooner or later have to engage in a serious discussion on the prospect of membership. Moving Moldova to the enlargement "basket" would give the EU far stronger leverage by making conditionality a more effective tool in promoting reforms. As long as the membership carrot is missing, increasing linkages and financial support may help to keep up motivation and soften the asymmetry of the relationship.³⁷ Conditionality is bound to remain weak in the current framework, but it has to be applied in a targeted manner to push for reforms that can be tied to clearly defined benefits such as visa liberalisation or tranches of aid. Eventually it is domestic political will that is the most important precondition for reforms and the main explanation to the differences between the EaP countries.

Altogether, the EU faces a complex task to simultaneously manage the expectations of Moldovans, be more demanding and critical towards the government's reform efforts, and maintain its power of attraction. Furthermore, it has to help the country find a way out of the presidential election deadlock. The stakes are high: if the EU fails to keep Moldova on the European integration course, there will be little hope left for its transformative power in the Eastern neighbourhood.

37 Cf. Gawrich et al. 2010, 1230.

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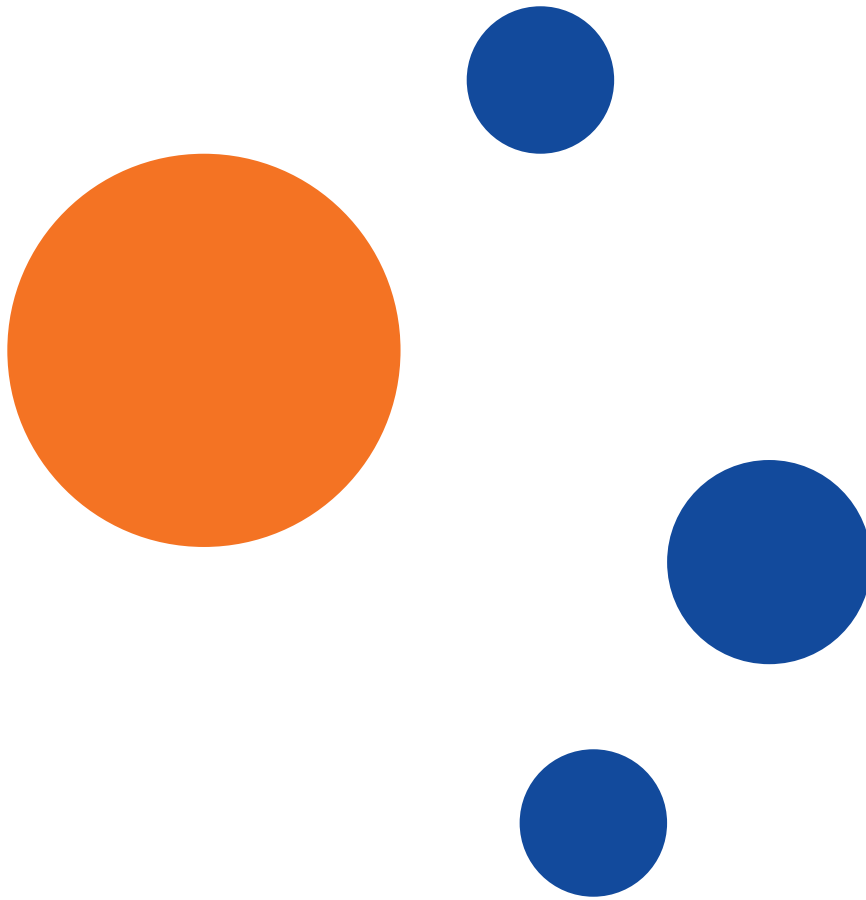
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