

TRAUME ȘI AMENINȚĂRI DE RĂZBOI: de ce este atât de importantă extinderea UE pentru Moldova și Ucraina?

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Rezumat: *Articolul abordează problema integrării europene a Republicii Moldova și Ucrainei. Autorul urmărește principalele provocări și amenințări pe care cele două țări au trebuit să le depășească pentru a obține statutul de tranziție adecvat de state candidate la UE. Textul compară nenorocirile lor și progresul lor către aderarea la UE. Articolul pune accentul pe starea războiului în curs Rusia-Ucraina, care reprezintă o amenințare directă la adresa existenței ambelor state. De asemenea, analizează sarcinile pe care Moldova și Ucraina trebuie să le rezolve împreună pentru a-și atinge obiectivul strategic de parteneriat și cooperare din ce în ce mai strânse. O atenție deosebită este acordată dialogului politic și implicării societății civile în europenizarea cu succes a ambelor țări.*

Cuvinte-cheie: Ucraina și Moldova, războiul ruso-ucrainean, extinderea UE, parteneriatul strategic.

TRAUMAS AND THREATS OF WAR: Why Is EU Enlargement So Important for Moldova and Ukraine?

Abstract: *The article addresses the issues of European integration for Moldova and Ukraine. The author traces back the main challenges and threats that the two countries had to overcome to achieve the proper transition status of candidate states to the EU. The text compares their misfortune and their progress towards EU membership.*

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The article emphasizes the condition of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, which is a direct threat to the existence of both states. It also analyzes the tasks that Moldova and Ukraine must resolve together to achieve their strategic goal of an ever-closer partnership and cooperation. Special attention is paid to political dialogue and civic society engagement in the successful Europeanization of both countries.

Keywords: Ukraine and Moldova, Russian-Ukrainian war, the EU enlargement, strategic partnership.

The events of the Second World War are receding into the distant past. Unfortunately, the world is standing on the threshold of a new world war, and hopes for politicians' responsibility in making fateful decisions are not especially high. It is no accident, however, that Europe Day, commemorating the Schuman Declaration, which marked the beginning of European integration, is celebrated on 9 May, the day after the end of the Second World War in Europe and the victory over Nazism. Europe's path toward unity is the path of understanding and accepting responsibility for the ruins and traumas of the two world wars, which were unleashed primarily in Europe [11]. Therefore, for those countries and peoples that have come to know the horrors of world wars in full measure and, alas, know from their own bitter experience what war is—as Ukrainians know in their confrontation with Russian aggression since 2014—the value of peace is fundamental. In our deeply troubling time, it is especially important to recognize the interconnection among these events.

Moldova and Ukraine have very much in common in their development during the post-Soviet period, not to mention their deeper historical ties, cultural affinity, and mutual understanding [6]. The European choice of our countries and its realization are decisive for our future, and we are now closer than ever on our common path toward a united Europe. The European choice of Ukraine and Moldova is determined not only by our economic, social, and political interests, but also by our civilizational aspirations, by the European identity that has long been taking shape in our countries and that requires renewed efforts for its development, alongside the civic and national identity of the citizens of our states [18]. Strictly speaking, we have never been outside Europe, and if we were, it was neither by our own will nor by our own choice.

It is appropriate to recall the principal stages of the European path we have traversed. At the end of the 1990s, Ukraine, somewhat earlier, and the Republic of Moldova, somewhat later, determined that European integration was our strategic course. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed by the EU and the post-Soviet countries, including our own, was the first legal framework for this cooperation, laying the groundwork for our reforms and rapprochement with the EU. It was precisely in the 1990s and the early 2000s that we encountered considerable difficulties in implementing our European choice, since our inexperienced elite, permeated by Soviet stereotypes, as well as a significant part of our societies, wavered between the Eurasian and European vectors of development [10, p. 135 - 136]. The economic problems of transition and the prevailing energy dependence on Russia were further complicated by significant polarization within our societies and by the substantial oligarchization not only of their social and political systems, but also of their economies. Our young and immature democracies, although they had chosen the European model of liberal democracy, often demonstrated their vulnerabilities, above all to internal and external manipulation and destructive influences. All of this led to a lack of confidence in our own capacities and to significant vacillations in the choice of domestic and foreign policy courses.

Nor should it be denied that, in those years, our development was additionally and quite substantially complicated by our peripheral place in the attention of the collective West, something that manifested itself clearly in relation to both Ukraine and Moldova. At that time, and indeed perhaps no less so up to and including 2024, politicians in Western capitals—Washington, Berlin, and Paris—adhered to the very dangerous and false principle of “Russia first,” or even “Putin first” [9]. The Russian factor, pressure from the Kremlin, its blackmail, and the systematic corruption it spread among representatives of Western elites had an extremely negative effect on the attention paid by a united Europe, NATO, and the world’s leading states to the needs and problems of Ukraine and Moldova. They somehow grew “tired” of them very quickly and for a long time [13], while not tiring, however, of tirelessly seeking common business and other interests with the Kremlin’s upper echelon.

Nevertheless, despite all these obstacles, our countries did not stop at the level of partnership and cooperation with the EU. Still, they set

a course toward the next important step: association with the European Union. Moldova was ahead of Ukraine in this respect at times as well. During the presidency of V. Yanukovych, we faced obstruction of our European aspirations and an attempt, in fulfillment of the Kremlin's will, to draw Ukraine into the orbit of Russian influence and, in effect, to complete external control. Ultimately, this culminated in his government's refusal to sign the already fully prepared and initiated Ukraine–EU Association Agreement, which, to call things by their proper names, was an outright betrayal of Ukraine's interests. Such actions met with growing resistance from Ukrainian civil society, culminating in the events of Euromaidan and, later, the Revolution of Dignity in 2014.

The defense and recovery of civic and national dignity, however, were purchased at a bloody price. In the February days of 2014, it became clear that Russia was the principal external obstacle on the path of Ukraine and Moldova toward the European Union. The last murderous shots had scarcely died away on the central Maidan in Kyiv, and the country had not yet had time to bury the heroes of the Heavenly Hundred—the victims of the confrontation with the puppet authorities living out their final days in Ukraine—when the Russo-Ukrainian war began. It began with the annexation of Crimea: illegal, unlawful, “justified” by brutal lies, and followed by events in Donbas, likewise orchestrated by Moscow, which grew into Russo-Ukrainian hostilities. It was then that the positions of Ukraine and Moldova regarding the war and the culprit responsible for its outbreak began to converge.

Understanding common threats and seeking responses to them led to changes in the interaction between our countries. In Moldova, there was a growing awareness of the extent to which the country, including because of the long-term trauma of the Transnistrian crisis—the principal obstacle to the proper resolution of which was and remains precisely Russia—found itself in a vulnerable situation. Gradually, our relations evolved into increasingly close, partner-like relations. From partnership, they have developed into a stable strategic cooperation, based on a growing and increasingly distinct understanding of common interests: ensuring security, democratization, and the European choice. Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 became the definitive watershed in the perception of threats and the commonality of our countries' strategic choices [1, pp. 635–636].

At first, shock, confusion, and even fear predominated in Moldova, as did attempts to preserve, so to speak, neutrality amid the unfolding large-scale war. Nevertheless, Ukraine's resilience and the collapse of the myth of Russian omnipotence led to changes in the initial position [4]. Understanding began to grow that Moldova would not be able to withstand the challenge unless it provided comprehensive political and other support to Ukraine. As a Ukrainian, with feeling, sincerity, and warmth, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the authorities of Moldova, to Moldovan society, and to the citizens of Moldova. This support, especially humanitarian support, was and remains very important for us. I recall that Moldova, relative to its total population, received the largest share of Ukrainian refugees [2]. Of course, Germany and Poland accepted the largest numbers of Ukrainian refugees, but in proportion to population size, it is precisely Moldova's support that has been enormous. Moldova's logistical and infrastructural support has been, and remains, extremely important for us. In addition, the Moldovan political elite, and naturally most Moldovan citizens, increasingly understand that Ukraine is the principal guarantor of Moldova's security.

The two countries are now on the path toward EU membership. The European Union accepted Kyiv's application for EU accession within a record three months of its submission on 28 February 2022 [7, p. 118]. At the same time, the Republic of Moldova was also recognized as a candidate country for EU accession [16, p. 130]. Perhaps not everyone understood the logic of precisely such a decision. Nevertheless, it demonstrated that Brussels and the member states of the European Union clearly understand the commonality of our destinies and the significance of our countries for the further successful development—I will not say completion—of the European project.

Moldova and Ukraine also simultaneously achieved the official opening of negotiations on EU accession at the end of 2024. Later, because of Hungary's position and its now-former prime minister, Viktor Orbán, this process was slowed down, which has been especially painful for Ukraine and has brought nothing good to Moldova. Nevertheless, over these years, a stable strategic tandem of Ukraine and Moldova has taken shape in the negotiation processes and in the internal reforms that must be carried out to ensure our countries' readiness to join the European Union is recognized.

Ukraine is carrying out the necessary reforms under enormous strain, in the conditions of a full-scale war with Russia that is already in its fifth year. Moldova has to address similar tasks under growing pressure from Russia, under the intensive hybrid war unleashed by it, and under the continuing military threat from Russian occupation forces stationed on the territory of the self-proclaimed Transnistria [14]. Overcoming internal difficulties and the challenges of full-scale and hybrid war has become the platform for our closest cooperation. Today, we expect that both countries will see the opening not merely of technical talks, as palliative substitutes for full-fledged negotiations, but of full-fledged official negotiations across all clusters of preparation for our accession to the European Union.

On this basis, I want to emphasize what we need to do jointly and together. First, there is no escaping the fact that our closest cooperation in the spheres of security and defense has come to the forefront. In addition to recognizing that Ukraine is in fact defending Moldova's security and borders as well, at the cost of the lives of its sons and daughters, Moldova itself needs to devote as much attention as possible to its own defense capacity and to strengthen its counteraction not only to hybrid threats, but also to sabotage and other threats and subversive actions on the part of Russia and its agents [17].

Our economic and energy cooperation must become closer. Incidentally, it is already delivering significant results toward achieving our energy independence, which has long been our country's Achilles' heel. But we need to achieve not merely partnership-based interaction; for us, it must acquire precisely an integration-oriented quality. Intensive political dialogue among us is developing at all levels of authority [15]: between our presidents, Maia Sandu and Volodymyr Zelenskyy; between our prime ministers, ministers, and agencies. Yet this cooperation must also develop intensively and fruitfully at the subnational level, through constant dialogue across all levels of authority, regional institutions, and our municipalities. This dialogue should be aimed at both mutually beneficial cooperation and concrete results for our citizens, communities, and countries. Together, we must be especially attentive to various machinations and traps. For example, we see that, partly in Europe and certainly in Moscow, they are playing the card of our disunity very carefully. The argument runs: let

Moldova into the EU first, while Ukraine can go on waiting [3]. From the standpoint of our strategic interests, Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the European Union, need to move forward together, consistently supporting one another, rather than attempting to secure temporary success at the expense of one or another illusory preference. Such preferences aim to make us not partners and allies, but competitors and adversaries.

We must develop common European projects across all spheres: not only economic, social, and political, but also education, culture, science, and technology. Together, we must continue actively to counter the Russian hybrid threat in the media space, including social networks. And now it is time to speak of countering not simply aggressive propaganda or an information war against our societies and countries, but precisely a cognitive war. It must be acknowledged that Putin's Russia has become highly adept at influencing people's consciousness, substituting concepts, and advancing its interests in the struggle over feelings, emotions, and the very understanding of ongoing processes—their meanings, direction, and future. This war is unfolding with extreme intensity and on a vast scale. We cannot afford to lose it.

With an understanding of the commonality of our tasks and prospects, we must encourage cooperation among our political parties—naturally, those that are pro-European and nationally patriotic in orientation, and that themselves require institutional and qualitative Europeanization. Cooperation among civil society organizations is valuable and significant, as both the influence on our authorities and the level of societal support for European integration transformations depend on their success [5]. It is therefore necessary to encourage and support partnerships among civil society organizations, because it is precisely civil society in our countries—and Ukrainian experience fully confirms this—that is the key locomotive of reforms and integration-oriented changes. What is especially important for me, as a representative of the educational sphere, is a comprehensive partnership among educational institutions at all levels, from schools and lyceums to universities, and so on: pupils and students, teachers and administrators. To successfully resolve all these tasks, we must intensify civic participation by involving our citizens in the comprehensive Europeanization of our countries as a guarantee of our democratic resilience.

Here, it is appropriate to recall a recent episode. I once happened to be traveling in a minibus from Chişinău and listening to the conversations of local women who, in good Romanian, were discussing strategic questions. One of them said confidently, “And what do we need this Europe for? Russia—that is something.” For me, this conversation was very sad, because if I had heard such a dialogue in Russian, I would have reacted to it more calmly and, conditionally speaking, with greater understanding. However, when residents said this in Romanian, it showed me that the country has not yet reached the level of civic education that is critically important and necessary for us. Similar problems also exist in Ukraine [8]. I very much regret to state once again that our national education systems still do not ensure quality civic and political education for our compatriots, despite all the shifts in this sphere and the considerable efforts of enthusiasts [12].

Without this qualitative level and without cooperation in civic and political education, it is simply impossible to effectively counter manipulation, subversive actions, and populism. And finally, a very important point is the joint representation of the interests of our two countries in Brussels, among EU member states, and before the European Union civil society.

I emphasize that Moldova and Ukraine have already traversed a long path toward a United Europe, together. Our mutual understanding and support have grown to unprecedented proportions and reached a new level compared to, for example, the same 1990s of the previous century. Yet common threats and obstacles remain. This is not only the Russian threat, although it is the determining one. It is also a certain fragmentation of our societies and their still high vulnerability to subversive and manipulative actions. Our countries need to achieve not only the internal, democratic, consolidated Europeanization of all spheres of our life—from the social to the political, from the legal to the economic—but also the full implementation of the Copenhagen criteria.

Finally, one last point. In overcoming our own fears, disunity, the collective traumas of the recent and distant past, and the long-standing experience of denationalization and depopulation, it is necessary to find and convincingly present to the EU those arguments and positions that will finally remove the still existing objections, doubts, and concerns regarding our rightful place in the system of the peoples of a United Europe, in the European Union. These tasks are difficult, but they are entirely within our capacity.

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