COOPERATION BETWEEN REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND EU: MAIN DIRECTIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Olga MARTINENCO

CZU: 327(478 + 4-672 UE) olga.tatarciuc99@gmail.com

Cooperation between Republic of Moldova and EU is deep and multifaceted, enriched with different programs and initiatives that bring benefits and tangible results. The promotion of political, economic and cultural-humanitarian dialog are the main goals which remain today on the strategic agenda of Moldova. The main achievements of EU-Moldova relations are: an effective implementation of the Association Agreements (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA)and visa-free travel agreements, as well as obtained by Moldova the candidate status for the EU membership which can be considered as the beginning of the new stage in EU-Moldova cooperation.

The European Union plays a huge role on the international arena and provides economic, political, social and other opportunities for countries, this cooperation for Moldova is a completely new stage on the European path.Currently, the political, economic and cultural directions of cooperation between the EU and the Republic of Moldova are taking on a new form, by promoting political dialogue, sustainable development of the economy and the transition to the market economy, as well as, strengthening good relations with neighbors.The EU is Moldova’s largest trading partneraccounting for 52.2% of its total trade, followed by Russia (10.5%) and China (8.3%) [1]. The exports from Moldova reach the European market, the strongest and safest market.In line with the EU strategy on international and cultural relations, the EU supports a vibrant cultural sector in the Republic of Moldova through initiatives and programs such as Erasmus +, the Culture Program or the European Capital of Culture initiative, Creative Europe Program and so on. During different periods of time, the Republic of Moldova assumed a set of obligations towards the EU, signing and ratifying a series of international acts which include requirements and recommendations which are important to implement in order to achieve progress in these directions.

In the realization of its commitments and implementation of domestic reforms, the Republic of Moldova is financially supported by the European Union, which have positive impact for Moldovan citizens, through the creation of jobs, the modernization of public transport, the improvement of infrastructure, the provision of mobility studies and exchange programs for students and teachers, etc.

The reforms observed in the Republic of Moldova in accordance with EU standards can be characterized as a significant factor for the development of the European vector. However, internal and external risks can hinder the processes of Europeani-

zation such as:the polarization of Moldovan society that presents a reason for the increased vulnerability of the country's young democracy;the low participation of citizens in political life, as the positive public opinion can be very important for the authorities in the promotion of the European values and reforms;the Euroscepticism that promote deep geopolitical divisions into society and often strengthened by the positions of the pro-Russian parties who are not supporters of EU enlargement;weak state institutions and public administration;corruption; Transnistrian problem and Moldova's internal instability.

Understanding the main problems that take place in the Republic of Moldova can help to quickly respond to the difficulties that Moldova can face, in this context the Eastern Partnership is slowly but steadily leading Moldova to the way of European integration, and it is not about the immediate Accession to EU, it is more about general benefits which Moldova receives due to the Association Agreement.

Achievements of the Republic of Moldova within the EaP, such as:

- implementation of the Association Agreements (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) [2] and visa-free travel agreements with Moldova;
- multilateral cooperation programs developed within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, in particular the Eastern Partnership Integration and Cooperation Program (EaPIC), from which additional funds were allocated;
- interregional programs and initiatives of were launched to support youth and small and medium-sized enterprises;
- integrated border management program, regional electricity markets, energy efficiency and development of renewable energy sources, cooperation on prevention of natural disasters and man-made accidents and so on.

Along with the indicated instruments of positive conditionality, an audit was applied to Moldova with the subsequent suspension of budget support for Chisinau [3], which can be considered as a negative conditionality instrument aimed at stimulating reforms through restrictive measures. However, after parliamentary elections in February 2019, suspended in 2018 EU grants and the macro-financial assistance became available to the government of the Maia Sandu.

In addition, the new realities and different negative situations that took place in countries of Eastern Partnership forced the creation of a New Flagship Initiative – the Trio Strategy 2030 (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). This type of regional initiative, designed to enhance cooperation between the countries of a region and to accelerate their joint integration, is a concept the EU, itself a regional alliance, sympathizes with[4].

Pro-European forces in Moldova have long wished to attain an EU membership perspective, and have been supported by several central European EU member states. However, given the problematic Western Balkans enlargement process and a series of EU internal crises, various EU member states, especially in north-west Europe, remained hesitant or outright skeptical. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine,

Moldovan authorities themselves had accepted that a membership request would stand little chance, and instead focused on already-gained benefits and reform challenges related to the AA/DCFTA.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine changed everything. Not only had the geopolitical imperative for closer EU-Moldovan integration become painfully explicit, but the Commission was also convinced by the pro-reform minded government efforts to combat corruption and foster democratization. As such, after applying for EU membership on 3 March 2022, the Commission issued a positive Avis on 16 June [5, p.11]. This step represents the most important achievement for the Republic of Moldova, as this in turn changes the dynamics of the EU-Moldova cooperation, if until now there were different models from Moldovan politicians who represented the foreign policy future of Moldova as a bridge between East and West, and this was reflected in the socio-economic situation of the country, now Moldova is finally getting its place in the geopolitical alignment.

Thus, the EU and the Republic of Moldova are developing an increasingly close relationship, going beyond cooperation, to gradual economic integration and deepening of political cooperation. Moldova’s status as a candidate country for the EU membership confirms the fact thatthe European Union support the efforts of the Republic of Moldova aimed at consolidation of democracy and implementation of economic reforms. For its part, the Republic of Moldova follows the EU prescriptions for reforming the country, improving the development of the economy and attracting foreign investment.

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***Natalia STERCUL,** dr., conf. univ.*