

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AT PRESENT TIME: REALITIES AND TENDENCIES*

MORARI Cristina,

PhD student, lecturer

Moldova State University,

Faculty of International Relations, Political and Administrative Sciences,

International Relations Department

The article presents an analysis of the role of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova at current stage and it was supported by the Marie Curie International Research Staff Exchange Scheme Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme. The European integration of the Republic of Moldova is a complex process and it was supposed to some difficulties due to the political and economic instability that country experience. Thus, the author highlights the main priorities that should be undertaken to advance the European integration of the country: 1) implementation of Association Agreement; 2) carrying out of reforms; 3) Transnistrian conflict resolution; 4) consolidation of the civic society role in the process of European integration; 5) assurance of social cohesion and promotion of information campaign for the population.

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European integration is the main course of the Republic of Moldova and is considered to be the main tool of modernization and democratization of the country. This fact is clearly underlined in the programs of the Government of the Republic of Moldova. So, in the Government's Activity Program „European Integration: Freedom, Democracy, Welfare” that lays out a framework for Moldovan governing policies for 2009-2013, is stated that European integration is a fundamental priority of the domestic and foreign policies of the country and in order to achieve this objective it is necessary to implement the commitments deriving from the European course of the Republic, as European integration means, above all, internal transformation of the country. [1]

Also, the document establishes, a range of tasks as: to involve the whole society, all the political forces and relevant foreign actors in the process in order to turn the Republic of Moldova into an European state with real prospects of joining the EU; to acquire and promote European values and standards in all the areas – political, economic, social and legal – by implementing the Copenhagen criteria and commitments made at the Council of Europe; to bring the national legislation in line

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with the EU acquis; to improve the legal and institutional framework needed to promote European integration at the level of Government in general and each ministry in particular, so that the European integration process becomes a major priority for each governmental entity; to capitalize fully on the opportunities provided by the “Eastern Partnership” etc. [1]

As it can be seen from these priorities, Eastern Partnership is one of the most important dimension of the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, and since 2009, the advancement of the Republic of Moldova in its European integration path depends on its results within this initiative. Within Eastern Partnership, Republic of Moldova has received from the EU three main bonuses: liberalized visa regime, Association Agreement with EU and Agreement on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with EU.

In this context, Action Programme of the Government of Republic of Moldova for 2016-2018 establishes as priorities for the Republic of Moldova in its European path, firstly, to promote a consistent and balanced foreign policy in order to ensure the European path and strengthen ties with international partners; secondly, to achieve political association and economic integration with the European Union and deepen bilateral ties with EU Member States and successfully implement the Association Agenda, aimed at achieving the statute of candidate country to access EU. [2, p.10]

Hence, in order to implement the Association Agreement, which has become the primary priority for the Government, was adopted the Association Agenda between the Republic of Moldova and EU. It replaces the Action Plan Republic of Moldova-European Union and provides a list of priorities for a common work that was designed to be realized in the period of time 2014-2016 and presents a good example of interdependence of external and internal dimensions of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. According to the document, EU will support Republic of Moldova in the accomplishment of the established objectives and priorities provided in Association Agenda. EU will use different ways to support the republic, as well as by sharing its experience, aid, the best know-how practice, information exchange, supporting of capacities development and institutional consolidation.[3]

Another instrument for Association Agreement implementation, but exclusively a national one, is the *National Action Plan for implementation of the Association Agreement* adopted for 2014-2016 years. This one is elaborated in accordance with the objectives of the Association Agreement and includes necessary actions that will be developed by the responsible institutions according to each Agreement’s compartments and annexes, including the part regarding the Agreement of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, within established terms and with specified necessary financial resources.[4]

In general, till 2014 Republic of Moldova was considered by the EU as “story of success,” being the best student among the Eastern Partnership’s participants. However, due to the economic and political instability that Republic of Moldova has coped with

since 2015, EU has applied the negative conditionality by freezing the financing of the Republic of Moldova. As result, as national experts underline, if by 2015 the EU-Moldova dialogue was characterized by an ambitious European integration agenda, then already by 2016 the narrative of the EU-Moldova relations was the "stabilization" of the situation in the Republic of Moldova. [5] In these conditions, the progress of the Association Agreement implementation also is modest. According to evaluation reports, in March 2016, the average of realized measures of *National Action Plan for implementation of the Association Agreement* constituted 24%. [6]

In this context, EU has undertaken some steps to help the Republic of Moldova to overcome its problems, but also has clearly mentioned its position and expectations. So, European Council of EU has presented its conclusions on Moldova according to which the Republic should fulfill following requirements: to restore the trust through tangible results on reforms; accelerated implementation of the Association Agenda; to prioritize reforms aimed at addressing the politicization of state institutions, systemic corruption, public administration reform aimed inter alia at enhancing the effectiveness of regulatory bodies, transparency and accountability in the management of public finances as well as with regard to policy making; to ensure that the cases of fraud that affected its banking system in 2014 are made subject to a thorough, impartial investigation, also with a view to recovering the diverted funds and to bringing those responsible to justice; to implement reforms which ensure the independence, effectiveness, transparency and accountability of the judiciary and of the anti-corruption institutions; to enhance negotiations on the Transnistrian settlement process etc. [7]

As the response to the EU Council Conclusions, a Priority Reform Action Road-Map was approved by the Moldovan Government. The Road-Map includes a total of 69 priority actions corresponding to 13 areas. Most actions, namely 46 priority actions were planned for March-April 2016, 19 priority actions were planned for the period April to July 2016, and 4 priority actions were defined as ongoing. [5] The Roadmap was intended to be implemented by July 31, 2016 and on 21st July 2016 was estimated that 77% of priority actions were realized.[8] This achievement has contributed to the improvement of the general situation of reform process and the relations with the EU. At the same time it is noticed a modest progress in the implementation of the Association Agreement too. According to the last evaluations, the overall implementation rate of the AANIP observed on July 1, 2016 is of 29%.[9] At the same time, even if the financial support of the EU continues to be suspended, European structures support the Republic of Moldova through mutual visits, evaluations and recommendations, especially that regards the Association Agreement implementation.

Taking into consideration the current situation Republic of Moldova is coping with, we consider the following tasks that should be realized for country's Europeanization, modernization and preparation for the advancement of the European integration process: 1) implementation of Association Agreement; 2) realization of

reforms; 3) Transnistrian conflict resolution; 4) consolidation of the civic society role in the process of European integration; 5) assurance of social cohesion and promotion of the information campaign for the population.

Thus, the priority number one is the successful implementation by the Moldovan Government of Association Agreement in reasonable terms, even if it was signed for an indefinite period of time. It is obvious that Association Agreement's provisions, that include Europeanization, democratization and modernization of the country as well, are actions that cannot be realized in a short-time period and require efforts in all domains. At the same time, this indefinite deadline, for implementation of its provisions, represents the main catalyst of the fulfillment of the assumed commitments. On the determination of Government in its actions and on the support of civil society depend both, the implementation of the agreement and the awards that will come after its fulfillment. As we mentioned above, the progress in the Association Agreement implementation is modest and backlogs overcome the results. Moreover, it is not sufficient only to adopt laws and elaborate new strategies of development, but also, it is necessarily to apply them efficiently into the practice. At the same time, this task requires training of a certain strong team of specialists that will coordinate the whole implementation process and will be able to negotiate a new agreement when the time comes.

The next task is the realization of reform process in the most problematic domains highlighted by the EU. This task is a complex and hard one, as it requires a range of actions to fight corruption, to reform the public administration and justice, to reform financial sector, to ensure the development of national economy and socio-political policies, to establish the rule of law etc. These are the core problems of the Republic of Moldova already for two decades. Even if these problems are domestic, for their solution EU has provided assistance within the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, Action Plan, and at the moment, within Association Agreement. In order to solve these problems, at domestic level were developed a range of strategies and action plans, the most recent being the above mentioned Priority Reform Action Road-Map adopted in 2016.

However, there is almost no progress and EU critics continue to be tough. The reasons of this situation can be considered the lack of political will, the lack of financial resources, political and economic instability. Thus, the situation can be changed once these reasons will be removed. At its turn, the realization of the required reforms will not only domestically consolidate the Republic (not only at political and economic level, but also at the social level, as reforms will have impact on social policies, labor market, education etc. as well), but, undoubtedly, will contribute to the increase of country's credibility among European partners.

Speaking about the Transnistrian conflict, it affects the whole country and requires a peaceful and sustainable resolution. Government of the Republic of Moldova applies the "small steps" approach in conflict resolution and it has some positive

results as re-establishment of contacts between the Moldovan authorities with the leaders from Tiraspol, creation of working groups on certain important packages of social and economic issues, development of 5+2 negotiation format etc.

Generally, the best scenario of Transnistrian conflict settlement is considered to be the Europeanization and democratization of the both banks of river Nistru. In this context, a very important role in the Europeanization of the Transnistrian region the economic dimension, taking into consideration that Transnistrian exports to the European Union were conducted under the Autonomous Trade Preferences regime, according to which companies from the region could deliver goods to the EU market in a duty-free regime, within the quotas set for the Republic of Moldova. Later, within Eastern Partnership, the EU Moldova Association Council adopted the decision to apply provisions of the Association Agreement covering trade-related issues (the DCFTA) to the entire territory of Moldova from 1 January 2016. [10]

Therefore, the decision confirms that the Autonomous Trade Preferences regime applied to companies from the left bank of the Nistru has been cancelled, and the DCFTA extended to Transnistria at current stage. In this context, Moldovan authorities should create conditions for the transition for the Transnistrian region, while the last one will adjust its policy accordingly to EU standards. So, the DCFTA could become a good, even if difficult, way of rapprochement of the two banks of river Nistru.

At its turn, the consolidation of the civic society's role in monitoring and realization of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova becomes an essential one. For a long time the Moldovan civic society was not implied in the European integration process, as the Government was, and continues to be the main actor in its implementation. However, today, have been appeared some important segments of civic society, as result of instability in the country, and this fact have contributed to its activation in European integration process, especially with the foundation of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform within the Association Agreement between EU and the Republic of Moldova. The platform, allows civil society organizations from both sides to monitor the implementation process of the Association Agreement and prepare recommendations to the relevant authorities both in the Republic of Moldova as well as in the European Union.

As result, was reflected the position of civic society regarding the implementation of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement through the joint declaration of EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform. According to this, the platform members, besides other important statements, emphasize that a broad and deep reform process is a precondition for Moldova's political association and economic integration with the EU and recall that the Platform shall be informed of the decisions and recommendations of the EU-Moldova Association Council, and look forward to regular contacts with representatives from the Parliamentary Association Committee and the Association Committee, including the created sectoral Subcommittees. [11] In

this way, the increased role of civic society will contribute to the transparency and better coordination of the European integration process of the country.

Finally, the social cohesion and promotion of the information campaign for the population have a great importance as the Moldovan society remains be divided and still poorly informed about the European integration process. Thus, National Human Development Report of 2012 (but the findings are valid for 2016 as well) clearly shows that the Moldovan government needs a better strategy to inform the public regarding Moldova's European integration vector in order to consolidate the people's support. One of the most striking findings of the survey is how much people's expectations and beliefs diverge regarding the European integration process. Some of the findings should be of concern for the Government.

So, about half of the Moldovan population is not able to describe at least in broad terms the current integrationist status of their country. Only 36 percent of the people said that Moldova is neither part of the EU nor the Customs Union but Moldova wants to join the EU. Another example reflecting how poorly informed citizens are is the fact that more than 62 percent of Moldavians believe that currently the Republic of Moldova is negotiating with the European Union the country's accession to the EU, while 54 percent believe that a topic of discussions between Moldova and EU is the possibility of legal employment of Moldavians in the EU. In fact, none of the two topics are currently being discussed between Moldova and the European Union. More than 39 percent of the citizens surveyed recognized that they are rather uninformed about Moldova's European integration process, while 23 percent said they are poorly informed. [12, p.45]

Researches underline that it is critical, at this stage, that every citizen be involved in the social, economic and political life in order to perceive and know the essence of change, new regulations, rights and responsibilities they have. This can be accomplished by: developing an effective and multidimensional communication strategy with the public; a massive information campaign concerning the essence of reform, the progress made, legislative changes carried out, practical implementation; developing communication tools, or using the existing ones to spread information concerning values, principles, European standards and their correct explanation; promoting, as actively as possible, the results of social, infrastructural, economic and environmental project carried out with the support of the EU; facilitating access to information regarding the activities of the EU and EU member states in the Republic of Moldova; communicating, promoting and explaining the benefits and disadvantages of European integration and other integration models; and setting up platforms for communication, discussion and training concerning the reform process, domestic and foreign policies of the state.[13]

Yet, there are some positive evolutions in this field, as civic society realize studies regarding the situation European integration of Moldova, some specific web sites as infoeuropa.md and europa.md work successfully and several centers of

European information activate. Also, web-sites of the Moldovan Government provide complex information about the latest evolutions in the EU-Moldova relations. However, it is necessary to be elaborated a European information strategy that will permit to inform different target groups of Moldovan society and provide not only general data, but also explain different aspects of European integration of the Republic.

In this way, it can be concluded, that in order the European integration of the Republic of Moldova be successful, should be realized all highlighted tasks. Republic of Moldova should be build the “Europe” at home, fulfill the assumed commitments and re-win the trust of EU. This will require the efforts of all political forces and of entire society as well.

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