

Department of Political Science
Master's Degree in International Relations

Course of International Relations of Europe

**Differentiated Europeanization in Moldova and Ukraine in the
Wake of the 2022 EU Enlargement: Assessing the Impact of
European External Influence and Domestic Factors**

Prof. Thomas Christiansen

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré

CO-SUPERVISOR

Giada Bilancioni

Student ID 652352

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2023/2024

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List of Abbreviations

AA	Association Agreement
AEI	Alliance for European Integration
AGE	Advisory Group of Experts
APO	Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office
CDIS	Coordinated Direct Investment Survey
CES	Commission for Exceptional Situations
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COVID-19	COroNaVirus Disease 19
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EEAS	European External Action Service
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ENTSO-E	European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity
EU	European Union
EUGS	EU Global Strategy
EUSR	EU Special Representative
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FDIs	Foreign Direct Investments
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HCJ	High Council of Judges
HQCJ	High Qualification Commission of Judges
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRI	International Republican Institute
MPs	Members of Parliament
NABU	National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine
NAC	National Anti-Corruption Center
NACP	National Agency on Corruption Prevention
NAPO	National Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NPE	Normative Power Europe
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PAS	Action and Solidarity Party
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

PCRM	Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova
PDM	Modern Democratic Party
PFM	Public Financial Management
PSRM	Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova
SAPO	Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor Office
SIGMA	Support for Improvement in Governance and Management
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of the Independent States
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank
WTO	World Trade Organization

ABSTRACT

With the outbreak of Russia's war in February 2022, the European Union embarked on a new phase of eastward enlargement. In June 2022, the European Commission granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status for EU membership. Subsequently, in December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with both countries. This decision, driven by security needs, has raised doubts about the effective commitment of both countries to align with the EU *acquis* and their qualification for membership. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine the paths of both countries towards European integration, focusing on their progress in Europeanization during the first year of candidacy. Based on the results of the implementation of the European Commission's recommendations issued in June 2022, the thesis aspires to demonstrate Ukraine's faster advancement in the adoption and implementation of EU-related laws, as well as the factors affecting its accelerated path compared to Moldova. Employing a dual structural and actor-centered methodology, this study scrutinizes both domestic influences and external EU pressures on both countries' Europeanization process. The conclusion will also attempt to predict the possible implications of such differentiated integration, should these countries become effective EU member states.

INTRODUCTION

I. The Relevance of the Research

The new wave of enlargement inaugurated by the European Union (EU) with the outbreak of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has generated a new accession perspective for three candidate states at the eastern borders: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Moldova and Ukraine were granted candidate status in June 2022, while Georgia received its candidate status in December 2023, "on the understanding that the relevant steps set out in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023 are taken" (General Secretariat of the Council, 2023). Moreover, in December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with both Ukraine and Moldova, giving a firm signal of its commitment to integrate the two states. Although the new Enlargement Package adopted by the European Commission in 2023 contributed to ensure simultaneous advancement of both Moldova and Ukraine in the accession process, this has not been the case over the years, suggesting that these two countries, despite their analogies in traditions and history, still present substantial differences.

Taking European integration and Europeanization as two distinct, yet complementary notions, this research wants to contribute to the understanding of how Europeanization is taking place in both countries. It wishes to investigate whether both countries are indeed progressing at the same pace or if one is further along in aligning its national structures and legal frameworks with the EU *acquis*, as well as to understand the possible reasons behind these divergencies. Therefore, the time period chosen for this evaluation is the first year as candidate states, although some references to more recent developments will also be included. The exclusion of Georgia from my research relates to the fact that its treatment by the EU has been different from that received by Moldova and Ukraine. Indeed, Georgia's candidate status came with several limitations imposed by the European Commission. Additionally, accession negotiations were not initiated, reflecting the country's backward position, compared to Ukraine and Moldova.

The curiosity for this research stemmed from the fact that the new wave of enlargement, which incorporated Ukraine and Moldova (and partially Georgia) in Eastern Europe, contributed to place Moldova and Ukraine at the same level in terms of European integration. Considering that before 2022 these two countries were integrating into the EU at different paces, I wondered what occurred to grant simultaneously the same status to both countries within the EU. This inquiry started with investigating whether the two countries

essentially levelled out in their processes of European integration. In addition, considering Europeanization as the result of “the impact of the EU-level political culture, norms, values and working methods on member-states” (Tanil, 2014), my interest has extended also to exploring how the EU might have affected this process.

From a political science perspective, this thesis aspires to fill a gap in the literature on European integration, particularly as regards the path to EU membership for Moldova and Ukraine. As this topic constitutes recent developments in the EU Enlargement Policy dynamics, lacking fundamental literature that comparatively assesses the two countries’ integration, my study attempts to address this void. In practical terms, the findings of this study could benefit both academics and policymakers by bringing insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the Europeanization process in Moldova and Ukraine. Specifically, this could allow policymakers to adapt their strategic policies and manage the relationship with the two countries more efficaciously. Understanding the hurdles to the countries’ progress may help them concentrate their efforts on the needed measures to enhance their proactivity, not only in terms of legislative but also institutional, economic and social capacity. By offering new perspectives on this issue, this research could also serve as a foundation for future studies on Moldova’s and Ukraine’s integration.

II. Research Question and Methodology

After setting the scene, delineating the relevance of the topic and the gap my research aims to address, I am going to define more in depth the questions at the core of my thesis: Is Ukraine further along than Moldova in the process of Europeanization? My hypothesis is that Ukraine is progressing faster than Moldova in the Europeanization of its domestic structures, due to the ongoing conflict with Russia, which has crystallized Ukraine’s steadfast choice to join the EU. On the other hand, Moldova has remained more indefinite due to its limited exposure in European media, visible to everyone. However, to avoid the risk of bias if just considered the level of media exposure of both states in the context of Russia’s aggression, the second aim of the thesis is that of investigating the variety of factors affecting this discrepancy. Thus, the second question central to my study is: “Which factors determine a faster Europeanization for Ukraine compared to Moldova?”

To answer this question, I must first introduce the methodology I have selected for my research. First of all, as explained in the above section, my methodology fits the two countries’ comparison, aimed at comparing the political and institutional systems of two countries. Specifically, Moldova and Ukraine fit the “most similar systems” design, due to

the similarities they showcase¹. Although there may be a risk of bias in using similar cases, the advantage may be that it is easier to use the same criterion for comparison, i.e., to define the same concepts and indicators, thus facilitating comparability between the two countries.

In this regard, in order to compare the progress of the two countries in Europeanization in the first year as candidate states (June 2022- June 2023), I will rely on the European Commission's Opinion on the Republic of Moldova's Application for Membership and Ukraine's Application for Membership (European Commission, 2022), employing them as a reference point to build my analysis. However, considering the customized recommendations that the European Commission has issued separately for the two countries, I will need to refine my approach by introducing a yardstick, in order to avoid unbalanced or generalized conclusions. The criterion used will be that underlined by Schimmelfennig's theory of good governance, stating that a low level of government capacity and administration hampers the effectiveness of policy implementation and thus slows down the Europeanization pace (Schimmelfennig, 2016). Furthermore, to define a parameter of "good governance", the SIGMA Monitoring Reports published by OECD for Ukraine and Moldova will be presented.

For the second research question, I will examine the factors affecting Europeanization based on two approaches: structural and actor-centered approach. This twofold methodology will allow me to assess both the influence of resilient structures and the role played by single leaders. In addition, a distinction within these approaches will be made between internal and external factors. The choice of the single factors for the analysis is based on my own hypotheses, then verified by substantial literature. Specifically, based on the selected methodology, I hypothesize the impact of seven factors. With regard to internal structural elements, I consider it important to assess the constitutional aspect, thus how the constitution regulates the process of alignment with European standards, the aspect of political relations between the executive and legislative branches of power, the availability of resources, and the cultural affiliation of the Moldovan and Ukrainian population with the EU. For the external structural factor, I consider the economic-financial impact of the EU and its normative power to be crucial, which comes through the study of internal structural factors. Finally, for the actor-centered part I assume the centrality of the leadership of the main political leader in the Moldovan and Ukrainian scenario (internal element) and the

¹ Within the method of two countries' comparison, the methodological approaches usually used are: "most similar systems design" and "most different systems design". (T. Landman, "How to Compare Countries," in *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction*, 2008)

consideration that European citizens have of both countries (external element). The second chapter will better clarify the reasons for this selection.

As for sources, I will mostly use primary qualitative ones. Therefore, I will analyze surveys and final reports of studies conducted by European and national, Ukrainian and Moldovan, think tanks². I will consult news directly from governmental sources, such as the Government or Parliament of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and I will use official documents regarding mainly the part of the analysis of the constitutional, institutional and political factors. However, for the assessment of the economic factor, I will also make use of graphs and numerical data, taken mainly from the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) websites. Secondary sources will constitute the literature background. Additionally, giving it is a comparative study, attention will be given to balance the number of data for Ukraine and Moldova.

III. Literature Review

On the literary scene, the study of Europeanization involves different perspectives and approaches. Regarding the *concept* of Europeanization, there is a high consensus among scholars about its meaning. In spite of this, not all definitions related to Europeanization apply to the peculiar case of candidate states, whose status does not fall within the category of EU members, thus suggesting their limited, or nonexistent participation in European decision-making. For instance, in *The Many Faces of Europeanization* (2002), Olsen describes Europeanization as the “territorial expansion of a governance system”, aimed at transforming Europe into a unique political space and into a center of collective action. This definition is clearly not applicable to candidate states and substantiates my findings about the restricted body of literature on candidate states’ Europeanization, which has had implications for my research. However, he also defines the same process as the export of Europe’s political models beyond its borders, consequently leading to radical changes in the domestic national systems. This description of Europeanization as a transformative process triggered by EU’s influence is not only suitable to the case of candidate states, but it is also present in many articles and studies published on the topic by prestigious scholars (Goetz, 2000; Lomaka, Yakoviyk and Bilousov, 2023; Grabbe, 2001; Dimitrova and Toshkov, 2007).

² Razumkov Centre and USAID & Internews for Ukraine; Institute for European Policies and Reforms and Institute for Public Policy for Moldova.

Concerning *how* Europeanization occurs, numerous articles and books address this issue, both in terms of tools used by the EU to influence it and in terms of assimilation of EU practices, norms and rules within the domestic national systems. As regards the former, the EU uses multiple mechanisms to shape the governance of candidate states: gatekeeping, benchmarking and monitoring, conditionality, money and twinning are among those (Grabbe, 2001; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). Domestically, states embark in a process of ideational learning (March, 1999; Tanil, 2014), adapting other countries' experience and models to their own. This has been specifically proved looking at the Europeanization of Central and Eastern European countries (Grabbe, 2001), which also accounts for the only documented cases of Europeanization beyond EU's borders to date. Their experience also represented the first time the EU could evaluate the effectiveness of their staged accession into the EU through the use of conditionality, making them important in my comparison between Moldova's and Ukraine's Europeanization. Despite the limited variety of studies on these peripheral neighboring countries, the existing ones were fundamental in grasping the varied nature of Europeanization among states. Indeed, the results of Europeanization in candidate states not only depend on the power and influence exerted by the EU, but also on how domestic institutions coordinate administrative proceedings to align with the EU *acquis*, the role of the executives, the relationships between the executive and legislative branches, and decentralization processes (Grabbe, 2001). Since the EU has not a model to impose as a reference for acceding countries in their process of alignment with the EU *acquis*, domestic structures are really determinants of the overall process.

At this point, the literature divides into two approaches to the study of Europeanization, which do not contradict each other but offer two distinct ways to analyze the phenomenon. The institutional approach investigates the impact of Europeanization on legal and political institutions, while the social approach focuses on the impact of Europeanization on cultural and social practices. As the thesis aims to explore the factors influencing Ukraine's faster alignment with the EU *acquis*, the analysis is based primarily on studies related to the institutional approach. Similarly, the literature on the institutional approach is divided between the proponents of rationalist and social constructivist institutionalism, which explain the reasons *why* Europeanization occurs through two distinct logics. The rationalist approach posits that states decide to enlarge through a logic of consequentiality, meaning when the benefits exceed the costs (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005); the social constructivist approach, grounded on a logic of

appropriateness, explains the phenomenon as related to the extent to which a state identifies, from an identity and cultural perspective, with the organization in question (Tanil, 2014). The two approaches, which have provided the backbone for my thesis, will be further discussed in its second chapter.

The literature related to the specific internal factors that affect Europeanization sometimes lacks both pragmatism and completeness. Indeed, it often focuses primarily on the structures impacted by the EU's influence, rather than on how these structures affect the process itself. Nevertheless, this latter aspect forms the basis of my research and represents the gap it aspires to address. In fact, the selection of the specific factors to analyze has relied on well-established literature. Concerning the external structural elements, the impact of EU Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) aligns with the discussion presented by Grabbe in *How Does Europeanization Affect CEE Governance? Conditionality, Diffusion and Diversity*, that lists all mechanisms the EU uses to promote Europeanization in acceding countries. As regards internal structural elements, the relationship between the executive and legislative powers, as well as the role played by political parties, was emphasized by U. Sedelmeier in *Europeanisation in New Member and Candidate States* (2011). Some academics have also outlined the negative effects of Euroscepticism on the process of Europeanization (Lomaka, Yakoviyk, and Bilousov, 2023), thus highlighting the need to address the importance of cultural affiliation with the EU. For the study of actor-centered dynamics, I mainly relied on the article published by A. Dimitrova and D. Toshkov *The Dynamics of Domestic Coordination of EU Policy in the New Member States: Impossible to Lock In?* (2007). Here, political actors are described as key drivers of institutional reform, pushing for desired outcomes to achieve their goals. This article posits that the main changes in EU-oriented reforms are directly connected to shifts in political elites.

Concerning the part of comparative assessment between Ukraine and Moldova, the literature profoundly lacks empirical case studies. Although Schimmelfennig's theory of good governance (Schimmelfennig, 2016) provides a valuable criterion for assessing the paths of these two states towards full Europeanization, I find it neglects the role of other fundamental variables, needed to be considered. As a result, my thesis aims to fill this gap by providing a comparative study of Europeanization in Moldova and Ukraine.

IV. Outline of the Thesis

My thesis structure is organized as follows. In the first chapter, I will delineate the evolution of the EU relations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Initially, this chapter will

provide an introductory overview of the two main policies characterizing EU relations with the two neighboring countries, namely the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the EU Enlargement Policy. It will then include a digression on the recent wave of enlargement, initiated by the EU following Russia's invasion in February 2022. This is fundamental to contextualize, both the influence the EU has on neighboring countries – its normative power – and the empirical assessment of the two countries' alignment with EU *acquis*. Specifically, the last two sections of this chapter will examine the progress made by both countries in their first year of candidacy, in line with the European Commission's recommendations. The degree of integration of both countries before achieving the status of candidates will serve as the *independent variable*, while the advancements made after one year of candidacy will serve as the *dependent variable*.

The second chapter will be devoted to the theoretical understanding of the concept of Europeanization, which is important for analyzing the *intervening variables*, representing the cornerstone of my research. This gateway chapter is indeed crucial for understanding the literature and methodology I will use throughout my third chapter and to explain the selection of the specific domestic and external intervening factors. To understand and explain *what* Europeanization is, a distinction will be made between institutional rationalist (Grabbe 2001; Goetz 2000; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005) and institutional social constructivist approaches. In addition, I will discuss the Normative Power Europe (NPE) theory and the mechanisms the EU uses to influence Europeanization in neighboring states.

Europeanization is described as the influence of the EU-level norms, political culture, working methods and values on member-states (Tanil, 2014). However, as EU's external impact on member and candidate states is insufficient to explain how Europeanization unfolds and why one country is potentially further compared to another, the third chapter will analyze also the influence of domestic factors. In addition, the chapter will be structured according to the structural and actor-centered approaches, to examine both the role of resilient political, institutional, cultural, economic structures and the role of actors central in decision-making.

CHAPTER 1

RELATIONS WITH THE EU AND ALIGNMENT WITH THE *ACQUIS COMMUNITAIRE*: UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA'S PATH TOWARDS MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

Europeanization, defined as a multilayered process through which EU policies, norms, beliefs and values are incorporated in the domestic system of governance, politics and identity³, is influenced by - and simultaneously influences - states' choices *vis-à-vis* the European Union. Considering this process in relations to countries outside the EU borders, the extent to which the latter align to EU governance, normative and economic models, suggests their willingness to deepen cooperation and integrate into the EU system. In relation to Moldova and Ukraine, the thesis aims to analyze the internal and external factors responsible for their differentiated path in the process of Europeanization.

However, before delving into it, it is important to define the nature of the relationship between the EU and the two countries and the legal framework within which they cooperate. This chapter will therefore begin with a description of the two policies that have framed the relationship of the two countries with the EU over the years, as well as their current status within the European Union. Subsequently, it will analyze the progress of the two countries in their alignment with the *acquis communautaire*.

In terms of structure, the first section will delineate the functioning of the EU Enlargement Policy, and the ENP, as the two key policies used by the EU to engage with neighboring countries. In addition, the relaunch of the enlargement by the EU in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 will be explored to understand the EU's interests in expanding eastwards and granting Ukraine and Moldova a membership perspective.

The second section will be devoted to describing the historical evolution of the relations between the EU and Moldova, the EU and Ukraine. After years of engagement and cooperation between them and the EU under the ENP framework, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine led them to being promised membership through the granting of candidate status, thus integrating them in the EU Enlargement Policy framework.

³ (Claudio M. Radaelli, «The Europeanization of Public Policy», in *The Politics of Europeanization*, a c. di Kevin Featherstone e Claudio M. Radaelli, 1a ed. (Oxford University Press Oxford, 2003), 27–56)

Finally, the chapter concludes by defining the position of both countries in the EU accession process, namely their progress in Europeanization in the first year as candidate countries to EU membership. The results of this descriptive analysis will be crucial for the last two chapters.

1.1. Two Tools to Engage with the Neighborhood: European Neighborhood Policy and EU Enlargement Policy

In this first section, I will briefly examine two policies through which the European Union engages with the countries in its neighborhood: the EU Enlargement Policy and the ENP. Firstly, I will illustrate the procedures and criteria driving EU enlargement. Providing a theoretical framework for this policy enables a more profound understanding of the EU's relations with Moldova and Ukraine since 2022, which will be detailed in the last section of the chapter. Moreover, it will recall the “conditionality” principle, useful to understand what guides candidate countries in their reform process to align with EU standards. Indeed, by setting the conditions for eligibility, the EU encourages candidate countries to move in the direction of fulfilling them. Secondly, the section will introduce the ENP, mostly considered as a substitute to the EU Enlargement Policy. Envisioned to engage in the relationship with southern and eastern neighboring countries excluded from the 2004 big enlargement, the ENP has shaped for years the relations of the EU with Moldova and Ukraine. Specifically, the second part of the first section will be devoted to the ENP's binding and non-binding instruments and the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the ENP regional dimension launched in 2009 to strengthen the economic and political integration of six Eastern European countries, included Moldova and Ukraine⁴. The reason why it is presented right after the EU Enlargement Policy is purely a matter of temporal sequence, having the ENP originated in response to the 2004 ‘big bang’ enlargement⁵ and therefore projected after the EU Enlargement Policy. However, the topic of enlargement will come back in the last part, when touching upon the “geopolitical reawakening” of the EU since Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

1.1.1. The Enlargement Policy: Procedures, Eligibility Criteria and Conditionality Principle

⁴ (Elena Korosteleva, Irina Petrova, and Igor Merheim-Eyre, «The Eastern Partnership 3.0: Change or Continuity?», Dahrendorf Forum, April 24 2020, <https://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu/the-eastern-partnership-3-0-change-or-continuity/>).

⁵ (Bart Van Vooren and Ramsen A. Wessel, «The EU and its neighbours», in *EU External Relations Law. Text, Cases and Materials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

The most sophisticated tool used by the EU in conducting its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is the EU Enlargement Policy, which governs the procedure and conditions for applicant states to access the EU, ultimately leading to its expansion. The process of enlargement, thus the procedure for entering the EU, is regulated by Article 49 TEU⁶, detailing the steps and substantial requirements for the applicant state to become a member (Van Vooren and Wessel 2014, p. 517).

As concerns the path towards accession, Art. 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) presents in brief the steps to the membership. The process begins with the country submitting its application to the Council of Ministers, usually after ensuring a positive outcome as a result of political negotiations. Upon submission, the Council requests the opinion of the Commission, which come to be published. Subsequently, with the consent of the Parliament, the European Council must unanimously decide to grant the applicant candidate status⁷. Attaining candidate status does not automatically correspond to the opening of accession negotiations, which is instead based on the co-decision of both the Council and the European Council. Meanwhile, the Commission prepares the framework for the negotiations, which involves the adoption, execution and enforcement of the EU *acquis*, comprising thirty-five chapters representing the policy fields in which reforms are needed⁸. The proposal preparation starts with the Commission screening each policy field in conjunction with the third country to assess its level of preparedness. The Commission then reports its conclusions and recommends whether to open negotiations. The final decision is made jointly by the European Council and Council, with the latter defining also which chapters must be prioritized, considering the position defined by the candidate country. It is

⁶ (Treaty on the European Union, “Title VI – Final Provisions Article 49 TEU.” 202 OJ C § (2016), http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/art_49/oj/eng).

⁷ The status of “candidate country” was introduced in 1997 in view of the following 2004 fifth enlargement to incentive accessing states from Central and Eastern Europe to advance democratic reforms.

(Frank Schimmelfennig, “Good Governance and Differentiated Integration: Graded Membership in the European Union,” *European Journal of Political Research* 55, no. 4 (November 2016): 789–810)

⁸ 1) free movement of goods, 2) free movement of workers, 3) rights of establishment and freedom to provide services, 4) free movement of capital, 5) public procurement, 6) company law, 7) intellectual property law, 8) competition policy, 9) financial services, 10) information society and media, 11) agriculture and rural development, 12) food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy, 13) fisheries, 14) transport policy, 15) energy, 16) taxation, 17) economic and monetary policy, 18) statistics, 19) social policy and employment, 20) enterprise and industrial policy, 21) trans-European networks, 22) regional policy and coordination of structural instruments, 23) judiciary and fundamental rights, 24) justice, freedom and security, 25) science and research, 26) education and culture, 27) environment, 28) consumer and health protection, 29) customs union, 30) external relations, 31) foreign, security and defense policy, 32) financial control, 33) financial and budgetary provisions, 34) institutions, 35) other issues which arise during the negotiations

(Accessible in the Section “Chapters of the Acquis” of the website: European Commission, “Enlargement - European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR),” June 6, 2012, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en).

worth to say that throughout the negotiation process, the Commission observes the candidate's progress and keeps the European Parliament and the EU Council updated through reports and communications. This explains why the length of negotiations is not predetermined but rather varies based on the speed and willingness of the country to pass reforms. Indeed, the chapters can be closed only after all EU governments in the European Council are satisfied with the country's progress in each policy sector. Finally, the process concludes with the signing of the accession treaty, through which the candidate country becomes an acceding country, expected to become a Member State in the date set forth by the treaty⁹. The latter must gain the support of the EU Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission and must be signed and ratified by both the candidate state and each EU country, in accordance with their constitutional provisions¹⁰.

Regarding the accession conditions, Art 49 TEU enunciates that the applicant state to the EU membership must be *European*, undertake the principles and values of the EU declared in Art 2 TEU¹¹ and respect the “conditions for eligibility agreed upon by the European Council”, thus meaning the prerequisite of aligning with the EU *acquis* (Van Vooren and Wessel, 2014). The eligibility criteria, also known as the Copenhagen criteria, were included in the Presidency Conclusions of 1993 Copenhagen European Council to ensure a merit-based accession process (Rabinovych, 2024). The first one corresponds to the guarantee by the applicant state of stable institutions, underpinning democracy, rule of law, protection of human and minority rights. This materializes in the Commission's preconditional examination of the structure, functioning and powers of the legislative, executive and judicial segments, as well as the respect of the fundamental rights. The second criterion concerns the economic conditionality, to ensure the state is characterized by a functioning and competitive market economy and avoid the risk of disrupting the performance of the internal market. The third condition is the acceptance of the membership obligations, implying the effective implementation of the EU *acquis*, once negotiations have been opened. Lastly, the applicant must take into account the ‘absorption capacity’ of the

⁹ In the interim period, when the acceding country awaits full membership, it is entitled to participate in EU activities but not to vote.

¹⁰ The procedure is available at: European Commission, “Enlargement - European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR),” June 6, 2012, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en.

¹¹ Art. 2 TEU: “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail” (Consolidated version of the Treaty on the European Union, “Title I - Common Provisions,” 202 OJ C § (2016), http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/art_8/oj/eng).

Union, meaning the interest of each country to include new members (Van Vooren and Wessel, 2014).

The respect of these criteria is dependent, although not exclusively, on the effectiveness of EU conditionality, defined as the power of the EU to anchor alignment to its conditions to a specific reward. In this regard, the literature addressing the effectiveness of EU conditionality, both in the pre-accession and post-accession stage, is extensive. Although some scholars disagree on the type of change conditionality triggers in third countries, whether merely legal, political, legislative or behavioral, they agree on the idea that conditionality makes the EU Enlargement Policy one of the most effective and ambitious European foreign policies in fostering peace, democracy, economic and political stability across the continent (Majkowska-Szulc and Wierczyńska, 2023). However, as Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier pointed out, conditionality is really effective when anchored to credibility and consistency, as well as a balanced cost-benefit calculation¹² for adaption (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). This explains why Europeanization occurs more easily for those policy fields that entail lower costs and why the membership prospect has the potential to increase the level of compliance of the candidate state. However, as mentioned before, conditionality alone is not sufficient to fully explain the phenomenon of Europeanization in acceding countries, due to the influence of other external and domestic factors. It is therefore the aim of the following chapters to investigate what these factors are and how they, along with EU's conditionality, impact Moldova and Ukraine's integration process.

1.1.2. The European Neighborhood Policy and its Eastern Partnership Dimension: An Alternative to the EU Enlargement Policy

Aware of the limits of the EU Enlargement Policy in engaging with neighboring countries not included in the fifth enlargement, the ENP was designed in 2004 to provide these countries, without an accession perspective, with special political and economic relations (Schumacher, Demmelhuber, and Marchetti, 2018). Initially, the policy included a broad and heterogeneous group of countries: Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine, The Republic of Moldova and Azerbaijan in the eastern neighborhood and Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Israel, Algeria and Palestine in the southern neighborhood. Then, between 2008 and 2009, the group split into two respective regional segments: the Union for

¹² Meaning the advantages and disadvantages of adopting pro-EU reforms.

the Mediterranean (UfM), including the southern neighbors, and the EaP, including the eastern neighbors. The EaP is therefore the eastern regional dimension of the ENP.

As concerns its implementation, it followed the 2003 “Wider Europe” Communication, delivered by the European Commission with the aim of raising awareness of the necessity to promote peace and stability beyond the EU borders in order to avoid new divisions within Europe (European Commission, 2003). To achieve this, the idea was to develop a ‘ring of friends’, with whom enjoying good and peaceful relations, while simultaneously ensuring the effective functioning of the EU decision-making structure and institutions. These special relations with the neighbors were then constitutionalized in the Treaty of Lisbon in Art 8¹³, which also established the Directorate General for Neighborhood and Enlargement (DG NEAR) underscoring the ENP portfolio centrality in EU foreign policy (Schumacher, Demmelhuber, and Marchetti, 2018).

Despite the ENP’s unique establishment, the logic of strengthening political and economic interdependence to promote prosperity, stability and democratic reforms in the neighbors has been argued to clearly mirror the EU pre-accession policy (Van Vooren and Wessel, 2014), with only some differences regarding the instruments and the absence of the membership prize. Indeed, similarly to the EU Enlargement Policy, the ENP relies on bilateral instruments to engage with the neighborhood, both binding and non-binding. For the former, the EU mainly relies on Art 218 TFEU, which governs the conclusion of binding agreements between the EU and third countries: Association Agreements (AAs) or Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), defining basic provisions on political dialogue, and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs), which cover issues related to non-tariff barriers and improved access to goods and service, and alignment to the EU *acquis* (Van Vooren and Wessel, 2014, p. 550). Besides this, soft legal instruments such as Action Plans, Country Strategy Papers, National Indicative Programs, Commission Communications and Progress Reports are used. While Action Plans are non-binding recommendations jointly negotiated between the EU and a third country, the other

¹³ Art. 8 TEU: 1. The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation. 2. For the purposes of paragraph 1, the Union may conclude specific agreements with the countries concerned. These agreements may contain reciprocal rights and obligations as well as the possibility of undertaking activities jointly. Their implementation shall be the subject of periodic consultation.

(Treaty on the European Union, “Title I - Common Provisions” 202 OJ C § (2016), http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/art_8/oj/eng).

instruments can be considered follow-up documents. Through these documents, the EU exploits its conditionality power to export its values and stimulate economic, political and institutional reforms in the partner countries (Van Vooren and Wessel, 2014), while not expecting a full transposition of its norms (Schimmelfennig, 2015), as happens with the EU Enlargement Policy. Like the latter, the ENP has been highly criticized. In particular, critics regard the absence of a clear membership award, which makes conditionality less successful and increases the adaptation costs for the countries concerned.

Relevant to delineating EU-Moldova and EU-Ukraine relations in the following subsections is the regional eastern dimension of the ENP, launched in 2009 under the name “Eastern Partnership”. It was specifically projected to reinforce EU relations with its eastern neighborhood and stabilize its eastern borders, especially in the aftermath of Georgia’s 2008 crisis and its repercussions across Europe. The EaP, established under the initiative of Poland and Sweden, includes the EU, the EU member states and six South Caucasian and Eastern European countries: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine and Belarus. Besides fostering bilateral relations through AAs and DCFTAs for Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, the EaP has developed a system of multilateral cooperation and visa liberalization with its partners. This cooperation has primarily focused on strengthening institutions, developing market opportunities, enhancing mobility and ensuring energy security (European Council and Council of the European Union, April 2024) and has contributed, as it will be explained in the following pages, to a degree of Europeanization in the domestic politics of partner countries.

1.1.3. The EU Enlargement Policy since 2022: Enhancing Security amidst Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, just two days after recognizing the independence of the Lugansk and Donetsk Republics along the eastern borders of Ukraine, dividing the country from Russia. The military intervention followed years of tension between Russia and Ukraine, particularly after 2014, when Ukraine directed towards a decisive pro-European stance within the Eastern Partnership framework. Unlike in 2014, when the EU failed to respond effectively to Russia’s intervention aimed at suppressing pro-EU protests in Ukraine, in 2022 the EU took a more united and definite stance. Despite initial worries from EU Member States about potential impacts of EU’s actions on energy supply from Russia, the EU managed to collectively condemn Russia’s military aggression and support Ukraine. Regarding EU’s

actions against Russia, as of July 2024, the EU's response to Russia's aggressiveness has been substantial. It has backed investigations into war crimes with €7.25 million for the International Criminal Court and has frozen €210 billion Russian assets, which are expected to generate around €2,5-3 billion a year for Ukraine. Moreover, the EU has approved fourteen sanctions packages to weaken Russia's economy and other individual entities (European Council and Council of the European Union, July 2024).

The support for Ukraine has been articulated in economic, humanitarian and military measures. Between February 2022 and July 2024, the EU allocated €108 billion to the recovery and reconstruction of the country's economy, including initiatives to sustain the energy sector (under the Energy Community Fund), to restore critical infrastructure, housing, hospitals, schools, and to attract private investments. On the military side, the EU and the Member States have mobilized €39 billion for military capabilities and have trained around 52,000 Ukrainian soldiers under the EU Military Assistance Mission for Ukraine. Humanitarian support has included millions of euros in aid and the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, allowing refugees fleeing the war residency rights, means to access medical care, education, accommodation and labor market. Additionally, in 2022, the EU established Solidarity Lanes to facilitate Ukraine's export of grain and agricultural products and the import of fertilizers, animal feed, humanitarian aid and other goods. This has enabled to export about 70 million of tonnes of grain, oilseed and other products, and to import 52 million of tonnes of goods for a total value of €157 billion¹⁴.

However, one of the most transformative actions taken by the EU amidst Russian aggression has been the reinvigoration of the Enlargement Policy, which has become EU's top priority in matters of CFSP. As a result, in June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status by the European Council, reflecting their progress in European integration. The same was for Georgia, receiving the candidate status in December 2023, despite its slower pace of reforms' implementation compared to Ukraine and Moldova¹⁵.

This "enlargement" response to Russian aggression has been assessed by recent literature in EU studies as indicative of an EU "geopolitical awakening"¹⁶, recalling Josep Borrell's famous speech. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised the awareness that, in an

¹⁴ All these data are Official Data accessible at: European Commission. Directorate General for Communication., EU Solidarity with Ukraine. (LU: Publications Office, 2024), <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/354365>.

¹⁵ (European Commission, "Enlargement - European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)," June 6, 2012, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en).

¹⁶ (Josep Borrell, The birth of geopolitical Europe: In conversation with Josep Borrell | ECFR, March 29, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/event/the-birth-of-a-geopolitical-europe-in-conversation-with-josep-borrell/>).

increasingly interdependent world, the security and stability of one's borders are closely tied to the stability and securitization of neighboring regions (Rieker and Giske, 2024), prompting a revival of the enlargement process as a security-building measure¹⁷. The need for predictability of events, enshrined in the concept of "ontological security"¹⁸, underlies this EU's renewed focus in the Eastern region. Furthermore, the EU's historical experience of the Cold War has heightened further concerns, reinforcing the belief that EU membership offers an effective guarantee of stability and peacebuilding.

However, a question remains as to why the EU opted for enlargement rather than merely engaging with its neighborhood within the EaP framework. An explanation for this approach is provided by the concept of "Strategic Autonomy" introduced for the first time in the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS)¹⁹ and further developed with the 2022 Strategic Compass²⁰, which significantly marked the EU's development into a prominent geopolitical actor (Marinova, 2023). This concept suggests that the EaP, with its weaker conditionality and lack of membership prospects, failed to provide the EU with the necessary strategic autonomy, thus making the enlargement policy more suitable for achieving its security objectives.

Some scholars have also resorted to classical geopolitical explanations to elucidate EU's enlargement aspirations in the region. These indicate the geostrategic importance of Eastern Europe for the EU and the opportunity opened by the war to exert an influence over the area (Lonardo, 2022). Specifically, Eastern Europe encompasses two strategically crucial areas, the Heartland and the Rimland, respectively the central and coastal parts of Eurasia²¹

¹⁷ The same idea is expressed by Frank Schimmelfennig in "The Advent of Geopolitical Enlargement and Its Credibility Dilemma," in *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkans (Geo) Politics*, ed. Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (European University Institute, 2023), 185–93.

¹⁸ "Ontological security" is defined as: predictability in relationships to the world, which creates a desire for stable social identities. (Christian Kaunert and Joana De Deus Pereira, "EU Eastern Partnership, Ontological Security and EU- Ukraine/Russian Warfare," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 1135–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2183182>).

¹⁹ The 2016 EUGS underscores the need for the EU to act united and independent to safeguard its common interests, employing both soft and hard power to guarantee peace and security across the continent. (EEAS, "A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy," 2016, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf).

²⁰ The 2022 Strategic Compass builds on the same principles of the 2016 EUGS and emphasizes the imperative for the EU to enhance its security and defense capabilities to act autonomously, while simultaneously maintaining strong partnerships with international allies. (EEAS, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defense," March 24, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en).

²¹ The theory of the Heartland was coined by Halford Mackinder in 1904 in "The Geographical Pivot of History" and underpinned the idea that who controls the Heartland, the central part of Eurasia, commands the world. In contrast, the theory of Rimland was developed by Nicholas Spykman in 1944 in "The Geography of Peace" and emphasized the centrality of the sea routes and coastal fringes to maintain the supremacy over the world.

(Marinova, 2023). Given the EU's geographical proximity to these zones, it is well-placed to pressure on them. Additionally, controlling these areas is seen as a means to command the world, a goal the EU aspires to attain (Marinova, 2023). This logic forms part of a longstanding dispute between Russia and the EU, wherein the EU views the region as its "common neighborhood", whereas Russia as its "shared neighborhood" (Schumacher, Demmelhuber, and Marchetti, 2018).

All in all, regardless the numerous geopolitical interpretations of the EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is clear that the geopolitical threat has been the major cause of the EU's commitment to enlarge, including new eastern members. The EU has indeed decided to seize the opportunity to become more autonomous in face of a pressing external danger and safeguard its own values.

1.2. A Historical Overview of EU-Ukraine and EU-Moldova Relations: 1990s-2022 Perspective

Based on the premises outlined in Part 1.1.3., the EU's 2022 new wave of enlargement has concretely materialized in granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. Although the current legal framework regulating Moldova and Ukraine's relations with the EU is the EU Enlargement Policy, it has not always been the case over the years.

The political, economic and cultural relations between the EU and Ukraine, the EU and Moldova started back in 1991, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened a gap in EU's foreign policy dynamics with its Eastern partners, requiring the EU to adapt to the new context. On December 16, 1991, the European Council adopted the "Declaration on the Guidelines on the Recognition of New States in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union", officially acknowledging the existence of the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as independent actors in the geopolitical arena. Consequently, in 1992, the European Commission decided to replace the Agreement signed with the Soviet Union in 1989 on trade, commercial and economic cooperation with bilateral agreements to be signed with the new independent states. Moreover, to provide technical assistance for their economic, political and legal transformation, the European Commission initiated the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program in 1991. This inaugurated a new phase in EU relations with its Eastern autonomous partners,

(Iren Marinova, "The EU at a Strategic Crossroads: A Geopolitical Player in Great Power Games?," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 28, no. Issue 2 (May 1, 2023): 117–40).

including Moldova and Ukraine, characterized by the conclusion of bilateral Partnership and PCAs towards the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century.

Yet, it was not until the EaP dimension within the ENP was established, that the relations between the EU and Ukraine, the EU and Moldova, as well with other EaP partners, evolved into a fully formalized cooperation architecture. Indeed, the Eastern Partnership helped to consolidate the EU's special relationship with its eastern neighborhood, raising the expectation for deep and effective EU-oriented reforms to enhance cooperation in the political, economic and societal realms. As a result, by 2014, the EU's relations with Moldova and Ukraine, came to be governed by advanced AAs, considered the most comprehensive and complex tools at that time²² (Ticu, 2011).

Part 1.2. of the present chapter thus aims to trace the evolution of the bilateral relations of these two case-study countries with the EU, from the adoption of the PCAs, the first bilateral tool governing their relations, until the conclusion of the AA. More attention will be devoted to the latter, due to its unprecedented comprehensiveness and complexity, serving as the first legal document setting priorities and objectives that have shaped and influenced their relations up to the present day. Providing a historical overview of their relations allows for a comprehensive understanding of their internal dynamics and factors affecting their Europeanization process today.

1.2.1. EU-Ukraine Relations: from the Partnership Cooperation Agreement to the Prospect of Membership

EU-Ukraine relations were formalized in 1998 through the ratification of the PCA, which included provisions for political dialogue and economic, justice and foreign policy cooperation. It also envisaged, in Article 4²³, the establishment of a Free Trade Area between the two parties (Schumacher, Demmelhuber, and Marchetti, 2018), as well as EU support for Ukraine in sectors such as agriculture, energy and industry. However, the PCA did not fully address Ukraine's aspiration for deeper integration and failed to recognize Ukraine's "European choice" (Schumacher, Demmelhuber, and Marchetti, 2018).

²² Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 too. It came into force in 2016. (European Commission, "Enlargement - European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)," June 6, 2012, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en).

²³ (EUR-Lex, "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and Their Member States, and Ukraine" (1998), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A21998A0219%2802%29>).

The year 2004 was pivotal for the general trajectory of EU-Ukraine relations and raised the Ukraine's hope for major concessions by the EU. When the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych was elected in 2004, pro-Western forces mobilized, leading to the Orange Revolution's protests (Maral Saribay and Doğan, 2022). The elections, deemed unfair and undemocratic, were considered void, resulting in a new vote (Tuncer and Erkut, 2022). The new elections were thus won by the pro-European Viktor Yushchenko, considered by the West capable of turning the country into liberal and democratic. Yushchenko's commitment to anticorruption reforms, EU and NATO membership, as well as nation-building (Tuncer and Erkut, 2022), inaugurated a new phase in EU-Ukraine relations, convincing the EU of Ukraine's serious intent to democratize and implement the reforms needed to further advance in the Europeanization process.

This new phase, evolving within the newly established ENP, further strengthened Ukraine's request to upgrade its relations with the EU and move from the established PCA to a new ambitious Association Agreement. In response to the Orange Revolution, the EU decided to adopt a new Action Plan for Ukraine in 2005 (Maral Saribay and Doğan, 2022), enabling a more differentiated and tailored-made approach in its relationship with the neighboring country. Through this new Action Plan, the EU anchored the promise of closer integration and the conclusion of the AA, on Ukraine's implementation of democratic reforms, introducing conditionality into EU-Ukraine relations. The Action Plan complemented the PCA by laying down general political and economic priorities, leaving to the Agreement the long-term cooperation perspective (Petrov, Van Der Loo, and Van Elsuwege, 2015).

Despite the commitment of Ukrainian bureaucrats to democratic reforms, the unstable political situation undermined the monitoring process, complicating the advancement of relations with the EU. Since the beginning, the EU has indeed clarified that membership could not be achieved without stabilization and democratization, clarifying that any misconduct would have impacted. In addition, the Action Plan's lack of clear and specific priorities made it difficult for Ukraine to track its progress, underscoring the imbalance between high short-term economic costs and the undefined benefits of effective implementation, in a time of economic difficulties for the country²⁴. The signing of the AA

²⁴ Russia's aversion to Ukraine's close ties with the EU and NATO translated into punitive economic measures. In 2006, as instance, Russia demanded that Ukraine pay \$50 per cubic meter of natural gas for the first three months of the year, increasing to \$230 from April onwards. When President Yushchenko rejected the request, Russia responded by turning off the gas pipelines, triggered an unprecedented energy crisis across Europe. (Bahar Maral Saribay and Seyhun Doğan, "European Union-Ukraine Relations in the Context of European Neighborhood Policy," *Yönetim ve Ekonomi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 20, no. 4 (December 31, 2022): 251–67).

was thus seen as the solution, with the negotiation starting in 2012. The latter was also designed to include a DCFTA, whose negotiations were launched in 2008 following Ukraine's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

A radical downturn occurred with the presidential appointment of Viktor Yanukovych in 2010, further raising worries among EU countries. His ties with Russia, coupled with his authoritarian tendencies, allowed for significant Russian interference. Indeed, Russia's concerns over EU's deeper cooperation with its "shared neighborhood" led it to apply both positive and negative conditionality on Ukraine, offering benefits for abandoning the EU-path and imposing high costs for continuing it. When it offered Ukraine a US\$15 billion loan and it promised to lower the gas price from US\$425 to US\$268, Yanukovych and his closest collaborators decided to accept, leading to the suspension of the Association Agreement (Schumacher, Demmelhuber, and Marchetti, 2018). The decision caused another heavy political crisis (Maral Saribay and Doğan, 2022), known as the Euromaidan movement, resulting in violent protests and casualties across the country. Yanukovych was dismissed and Russia reacted by launching a full-scale invasion of Crimea, annexing it and supporting pro-Russian groups in Eastern Ukraine. The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic were established as well. For the first time the EU unanimously deliberated to impose economic sanctions on Russia (Schumacher, Demmelhuber, and Marchetti, 2018). However, divisions among some EU Members persisted, due to some countries' ties with Russia, undermining EU's credibility on the global scale (MacFarlane and Menon, 2014). This situation also prompted the EU to shift its focus from democracy promotion to securitization and crisis management, launching a new phase in EU-Ukraine relations.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ukraine's interim government pushed to open talks with the EU for the adoption of the new Association Agreement, declared as "the most advanced agreements of its kind negotiated by the EU" (Petrov, Van Der Loo, and Van Elsuwege, 2015). Its uniqueness derives from three main features characterizing it: comprehensiveness, complexity and conditionality. Indeed, the Agreement is first and foremost comprehensive because it includes cooperation between the EU and Ukraine on many policy areas: foreign and security, justice, freedom and nuclear energy. Secondly, it is complex due to its ambition to include a DCFTA, aimed at integrating Ukraine's economy into the EU internal market. Lastly, the feature of conditionality stems from the EU's approach of anchoring the promise of deeper cooperation to the effective implementation of democratic reforms (Petrov, Van Der Loo, and Van Elsuwege, 2015).

The signing of the Agreement did raise some concerns. The President, responsible for the signature, was elected by the Parliament in an emergency situation, raising questions about his legitimacy to sign it. However, given the urgency, the EU Heads of States and Governments announced on March 6, 2014, that the political provisions of the Agreement would be provisionally applied first, allowing the Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk to sign the political part²⁵ on March 21, 2014. The economic part was then signed by President Petro Poroshenko on June 27, 2014, during a meeting with the European Council²⁶. Both parts together formed a single document. The Agreement comprises a preamble, setting out its purposes and seven Titles: General Principles; Political Cooperation and Foreign and Security Policy; Justice Freedom and Security; Trade and Trade related matters (DCFTA); Economic and Sector Cooperation; Financial Cooperation with Anti-Fraud Provisions, as well as Institutional, General and Final Provisions. It granted Ukrainians the right to travel without visas to the Schengen zone and required improvements in human rights protection, rule of law, technology, sustainable development, industry, transport, education, culture and democracy. Additionally, it required the introduction of security and migration policy, as well as a change in foreign policy towards Russia.

The DCFTA, designed to be included in the AA was signed only on January 1, 2016, and was brought into effect on September 1, 2017, generating positive outcomes for Ukraine and EU's economy²⁷. It offers Ukraine a framework for protecting and improving its trade relations and for boosting economic development through markets' liberalization. It also includes the removal of import and export tariffs and the harmonization of norms and laws to align Ukrainian key sectors with EU standards²⁸.

Despite the AA's acknowledging Ukraine's European aspirations, no reference was made to membership, though it did not exclude the possibility (Petrov, Van Der Loo, and

²⁵ He signed in particular The Preamble, Title I "General Principles" Title II "Political dialogue and reform, political association, cooperation and convergence in foreign and security policy" and Title VII "Institutional, general and final provisions"

(Government of Ukraine, "Association Agreement between the European Union and Its Member States, of the One Part, and Ukraine, of the Other Part" (2017), <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/yevropejska-integraciya/ugoda-pro-asociacyu>).

²⁶ He signed in particular Title III "Justice, Freedom and Security", Title IV "Trade and trade-related matters", Title V "Economic and sector cooperation" and Title VI "Financial cooperation and anti-fraud provisions" Ibid.

²⁷ According to data collected on Eurostat, from 2015 to 2021 EU exports to Ukraine rose from €14 billion to €28.3 billion, while EU imports from Ukraine heightened from €13.2 billion (in 2016) to €24.1 billion in 2021. (Bahar Maral Saribay and Seyhun Doğan, "European Union-Ukraine Relations in the Context of European Neighborhood Policy," *Yönetim ve Ekonomi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 20, no. 4 (December 31, 2022): 251–67).

²⁸ To download the DCFTA document: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Ukraine-EU Association Agreement," accessed July 25, 2024, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/about-ukraine/european-integration/eu-ukraine-association-agreement>.

Van Elsuwege, 2015). In this regard, the Preamble mentions the common history and values shared between the EU and Ukraine and leaves open the prospect to upgrade their relations. Moreover, the EU's demands for implementing policies in compliance with its fundamental values are deemed consistent with the Copenhagen criteria²⁹, aiming for convergence with the EU in economic, legal and political realms. On the economic side, the DCFTA aims at supporting Ukraine in its transition towards a functioning market economy³⁰. Whereas, institutionally, the AA establishes the Association Council, with decision-making capacity, substituting the Cooperation Council under the PCA, whose power was limited to making non-binding recommendations (Petrov, Van Der Loo, and Van Elsuwege, 2015). The latter is further assisted by an Association Committee composed of civil society representatives. Civil society is indeed expected to be more involved in the field of trade and sustainable development, as well as in political and social dialogues (Petrov, Van Der Loo, and Van Elsuwege, 2015), making its empowerment one of the main objectives of the AA.

The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, with its features of comprehensiveness, complexity and conditionality similar to a pre-accession treaty, has been indicative of significant advancements in EU-Ukraine relations. The period 2014-2019 proved to be greatly successful for Ukraine's integration endeavors, as recognized during the annual EU-Ukraine Summits by various European leaders. Already in 2018, the Association Implementation report published by the European External Action Service (EEAS) underscored great improvements in the trade sector, seeing a 24% increase since 2014 (European Commission, 2018). Additionally, the visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens, voted by the European Parliament in 2017, facilitated travel for over half a million Ukrainians by 2018 and gave the opportunity to take part to the Erasmus+ program to thousands of Ukrainian students. Despite these achievements, substantial improvements in the judiciary and anti-corruption, as well as in gas and electricity independence sectors, were encouraged.

It was particularly from 2019 that Ukraine's relations with the EU experienced a significant enhancement. Indeed, in 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the pro-European leader of the Servant of the People's Party, triumphantly assumed the presidency, significantly enhancing Ukraine's path towards EU integration. Under his presidency, Ukraine experienced an unprecedented acceleration of reforms, even despite the difficulties posed by the Russian invasion of the country in 2022. At the 2020 EU-Ukraine Summit (European

²⁹ Reference in para. 1.1.1.

³⁰ Art 1 (2)(d) EU-Ukraine Association Agreement

Council and Council of the European Union, 2020), it was declared that the AA had led to a trade increase of about 65% since 2016, with the EU becoming Ukraine's biggest trading partner. Ukraine implemented reforms in land ownership, banking, and decentralization and announced the initiation of the High Anti-Corruption Court, demonstrating a committed stance against corruption and alignment with EU standards. In return, the EU reaffirmed its support, mobilizing a €190 million support package and €1.2 billion in macro-financial assistance to help Ukraine tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic impacts. Zelenskyy not only urged the Government to seriously commit to the needed reforms but also elevated Ukraine's relations with the EU to a new stage. A significant landmark was his campaign to secure the support from EU member states for Ukraine's membership application (Vidnyanskyj, 2022). This was inaugurated in March 2021 by a joint declaration signed in Kyiv with the President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda, and subsequently supported by Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Croatia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Their support was crucial as it boosted EU confidence in Ukraine, ultimately granting the country the candidate status. Following the outbreak of Russia's invasion, Ukraine submitted its membership application on February 28, 2022, only four days after the invasion began. With the consent of the European Parliament and the support of some EU countries, the European Commission published its opinion on Ukraine's membership application. After that, the European Council voted unanimously to grant Ukraine candidate status in June 2022. So far, this represents the last stage in EU-Ukraine relations, complemented by the initiation of the accession negotiations in December 2023.

Since the onset of Russian war, the EU is also doing its utmost to help Ukraine, significantly contributing to strengthening their cooperation in the political, economic, humanitarian and military fields, as well as accelerating Ukraine's alignment with the EU *acquis*. In March 2024 the Ukraine Facility instrument came into force to provide up to €50 billion in loans and grants for the timeframe 2024-2027, in order to support Ukraine's macro-financial stability, its reconstruction and recovery. Part of the Ukraine Facility are also the Ukraine Investment Framework, established to attract private and public investments, and the Ukraine Plan, development by the Government of Ukraine with the same objective of boosting reforms, economic growth and attract new investments.

1.2.2. EU-Moldova Relations: from the Partnership Cooperation Agreement to the Prospect of Membership

Historically situated at the cross-roads between the West and East, Moldova has pursued, since its independence, a twofold foreign policy, promoting peaceful relations with the EU, while at the same time keeping close ties with Russia (Schmidtke and Chirapascanut, 2011). This political ambivalence characterizing Moldova's domestic politics, has determined EU's "back and forth" approach in the cooperation with the country, leading to numerous "U-turns" from both sides throughout the history of their economic, political and cultural relations (Corman and Schumacher, 2023).

EU-Moldova relations began in 1994 with the conclusion of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which then entered into force in July 1998. One year later, in 1999, the Prime Minister Ion Sturza proclaimed European integration the priority of the newborn government, leading in 2002 to the establishment of the National Commission for European Integration by President Vladimir Voronin, aimed at elaborating the European Integration Strategy for the Republic of Moldova (Ticu, 2011). Consequently, the cooperation between Moldova and the EU intensified with the launch of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and particularly within the Eastern Partnership regional dimension by 2009, giving Moldova the opportunity to be included in many inter-institutional meetings and projects promoted by the EU, which ultimately reinforced its relations with the other European partners and widened its access to fundings from the EU (Constantinescu, 2020).

In 2005, Jean Asselborn, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Immigration of Luxembourg, and Vasile Tarlev, Prime Minister of Moldova, signed the EU-Moldova Action Plan. This document, though not binding in nature, set the commitments for Moldova to strengthen the dialogue with the EU, based on the fulfillment of strategic goals to reform its political, economic, security and cultural spheres. In return, the EU promised to actively commit to the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict³¹, with the Council appointing in March 2005 the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Moldova, in charge of reaching a resolution of the conflict. The implementation of the Action Plan was a prerequisite for new agreements between Moldova and the EU, as announced by the European Commission President José Manuel Barroso in a meeting in Brussels with President Voronin in 2008.

³¹ Transnistria is a breakaway region at Moldova's eastern borders, which has de facto proclaimed independent in the 1990s. Its economic and political system have been influenced by Russian values, culture, norms and traditions, with Moscow exerting strong pressure and supporting its illegal activities, such as trafficking, smuggling, organized crimes and weapons production. (Rodica Hagemann, Mariana Zubeschi, and Carmen Nastase, "The Role of European Integration and European Neighborhood Policy in the Europeanization of Moldova," *EURINT* 1 (2021): 56–83).

Despite the President's assurance of the country's alignment with the democratic reforms, in the eve of the 2009 parliamentary elections, Moldova's rhetoric *vis-à-vis* the EU changed drastically. President Vladimir Voronin, at that time chairman of the Communist Party (PCRM), starkly criticized the Eastern Partnership's objectives, declaring it an imitation of the CIS "under the control of the EU" (Ticu, 2011), aiming at winning Moscow's support to win the election. In the aftermath of 2009 parliamentary elections, the EU did its first "back" in the relations with Moldova. Indeed, President's Voronin imposition of visa regime against Romania, accused of having backed the anti-communist protests blown up after the elections³², was not well welcomed by the EU. Despite elections re-scheduled in 2010 saw the victory of the Alliance for European Integration (AEI)³³, whose top priority was accelerating the reform process to integration into the EU, the political and economic stability generated by the previous government, as well as the weakening of democracy, undermined Moldova's Europeanization agenda (Ticu, 2011). Notwithstanding, Moldova lifted the visa restriction for Romanian citizens and proceeded to the normalization of their relations. This, together with the fight of corruption and the implementation of justice and rule of law reforms were among the prerequisite to deepen the relations with the EU.

In 2014, Moldova-EU relations saw an acceleration with the conclusion of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, whose negotiations were initiated back in 2009. Moreover, Moldova was also the first Eastern Partnership country to achieve visa-free regime, allowing citizens to travel to Europe (Deen and Zweers, 2022). As for Ukraine, the Association Agreement has been the most advanced, comprehensive and complex legal framework regulating EU-Moldova relations so far. Its contribution is not different from that of Ukraine, as it includes similar objectives and priorities. In Article 1 of the AA³⁴, Moldova undertakes to respect of the EU fundamental principles aimed at consolidating peace, security, democracy, justice and at strengthening

³² The Twitter revolution of April 2009 was characterized by the outbreak of protests across the country against President Voronin and his collaborators to defend the democratic aspirations of Moldovan citizens who were against his pro-Russian politics.

(Oliver Schmidtke and Constantin Chira-Pascanut, "Contested Neighbourhood: Toward the 'Europeanization' of Moldova?," *Comparative European Politics* 9, no. 4–5 (September 2011): p. 479).

³³ The Alliance was composed of the Modern Democratic Party (PDM), The Liberal Party (PL) and the Liberal-Democratic Party (PLDM).

(Christian Hagemann, "Moldova's Parliamentary Elections – A Realistic Chance for Fundamental Reforms?," *Südosteuropäische Mitteilungen*, 2021).

³⁴ (European Union, "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and Their Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the Other Part," Pub. L. No. OJ L 260, 4 (2014), [https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22014A0830\(01\)](https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22014A0830(01))).

their economic and commercial ties. In exchange, the EU recognizes Moldova's endeavors to European integration and its European roots, as enshrined also in the Preamble of EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. Institutionally, the Agreement envisages the setting-up of the Association Council, the decision-making body monitoring the implementation of the AA provisions. Besides that, the Association Committee and the Parliamentary Association were established, the one to assist the Council and the second, composed of members of the EU and Moldova's Parliaments, to make recommendation to the Council. Moreover, the Agreement is composed of seven Titles, with Title V corresponding to the DCFTA provisions. The DCFTA's objective is that of enhancing the integration of Moldova in the EU Internal Market, ultimately attracting more foreign direct investments, increase trade and undergo the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The modernization of the agricultural sector also figures among the top priorities of the DCFTA.

However, despite the potential of the Agreement in accelerating Moldova's reform implementation to align with the EU conditions, the years following its signing were not as flourishing as for Ukraine. Indeed, the dual nature of the country, whose historical and cultural heritage have been shared for a long time with Romania and Russia, has sometimes negatively and sometimes positively affected its relations with the EU (Schmidtke and Chira-Pascanut, 2011). This is the reason why EU-Moldova relations have been said to be characterized by ups and downs, depending on the performance and failures of Moldova to achieve its commitments and ultimately on the country's engagement with Moscow.

Following the Association Agreement conclusion in June 2014, Moldova's state of corruption was among the highest in the world (Corman and Schumacher, 2023). Since the Modern Democratic Party (PDM) took the drive of the government in 2016, the democratic environment worsened drastically. Indeed, the Party was headed by Vladimir Plahotniuc, who established an actual oligarchy featured by elements of state capture, media control, lack of judiciary independence and economic monopolization. Under his chair, the Party was accused of two big fraud scandals, the Russian Laundromat and the billion-dollar theft³⁵, generating dissatisfaction among citizens, resulted in widespread anti-corruption protests. In response, the EU suspended its aid measures to Moldova in 2015 worth €40.7 million (Corman and Schumacher, 2023) and threatened the government that the payment would not

³⁵ It was found out that billions of US dollar were laundered through Moldovan banks between 2010 and 2014 and then transferred to European bank accounts. (Mihai-Razvan Corman and Tobias Schumacher, "Going Back and Forth: European Union Resilience-Building in Moldova between 2014 and 2020," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 1106–21).

have been resumed until it did not reform the prosecution service, did not investigate into the fraud scandals and did not implement norms to counter corruption within state institutions. In technical terms, the EU shifted from an *ex-post conditionality* to an *ex-ante conditionality* approach, making the alignment to the AA's commitments a precondition to receive financial support.

In 2016, the adoption of the EU Global Strategy, posing resilience-building among the top EU's priority in dealing with third countries, pushed the EU to be more flexible and, though Moldova did not fully adhere with EU's conditions, the EU adopted the Single Support Framework for 2017-2020 aimed at implementing local project and empowering civil society. In that, the opinion of Moldovan citizens mattered considerably: their idea was that if the EU would have focused more its attention on the civil society, the two scandals would not have been occurred. This loss of confidence, coincided with the first direct presidential elections in 2016, has indeed led to the defeat of the reformist, pro-European Maia Sandu, leader of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) in favor of the revisionist, pro-Russian Igor Dodon, leader of the Socialist Party (PSRM), convincing the EU that a more resilient and forward-looking approach had to be adopted.

In 2019, a window of hope for the advancement of democratic reforms opened with the expel of Plahotniuc from the government and the appointment of Maia Sandu as Prime Minister. Her Action and Solidarity Party became increasingly powerful since 2016, after the banking fraud scandals, representing a party of its kind free from oligarchic influence (Hagermann, 2021). Maia Sandu was elected within the minority ACUM bloc, winning the elections, and governing with the revisionist and pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova³⁶. The advanced reforms to counter corruption, money laundering, to de-politicize the judiciary, to enhance transparency and rule of law backed by the new government were welcomed positively by the EU, which decided to allocate budget support assistance amounting to €53.89 million, as well as macro-financial assistance worth €30 million to assist the state in the implementation of reforms (Corman and Schumacher, 2023). However, it became clear soon that the socialists in the coalition, pro-Russian in nature, were not really interested in meeting EU criteria, but rather they were just interested in receiving

³⁶ The ACUM bloc, formed for the 2019 Moldovan parliamentary elections was composed of the Dignity and Truth Platform Party of Andre Nastase and the Party of Action and Solidarity of Maia Sandu to strengthen their anti-corruption efforts in view of European integration. (European Parliament, "Report of the European Parliament Delegation for the Observation of the Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Moldova," February 24, 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212474/Moldova-EP-Report-parliamentary-elections_Feb_2019.pdf).

more external financing, resulting in a lack of effort to promote democratic changes. When Maia Sandu attempted to save the justice reform's law, giving herself the prerogative of fairly appointing the candidates for general prosecutor, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, together with the Modern Democratic Party brought the government down in November 2019. Again, the misconduct spilled to the EU, accused of having naively counted on the role of one single person in achieving the expected results, without considering the impact of opposition parties in the government.

With the new government formed by MPs of the Modern Democratic Party and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, the judicial reforms initiatives backed by Maia Sandu were abandoned, leading the EU to use the same rhetoric used against the Plahotniuc's regime, but with a new novelty, characterized by a beyond-anti-corruption-approach. Local communities were indeed put at the center of EU's efforts in the country, with projects addressed towards environmental protection, rural development and business environment.

The last phase of EU-Moldova relations, continuing until nowadays, has seen an important take-off in the reform implementation. It started in 2020, when Maia Sandu defeated the socialist Igor Dodon in the second ballot of the presidential elections, and consolidated in July 2021, when she recorded an overwhelming victory in parliamentary elections, with her party garnering an absolute majority of the vote (52.8 percent). Her success, the result of years of efforts to build citizens' trust, was a clear suggestion that people just wanted to do away with the traditional political divisions along identity and geopolitical lines, preferring a new politics free of oligarchic influence and corruption (Deen and Zweers, 2022). Her party, controlling simultaneously the presidency, the government and the parliament was welcomed by the EU as a positive development, with the latter expecting a radical political change in the country and finally a departure from corruption and state capture, which have undermined the state of democracy, rule of law and the state of institutions for years, ultimately slowing down Moldova's path towards EU integration (Hagermann, 2021). This recognition came also in occasion of the sixth Association Council meeting in October 2021, where the EU expressed its appreciation for the ambitious reform agenda to improve the justice system, fight corruption and enhance rule of law; and encouraged Moldova to make steps in the energy market sector to improve transparency and competition. At the meeting, the Association Council also reminded of the EU's solidarity measures to help Moldova with the COVID-19 pandemic and its socioeconomic consequences, amounting to over €160 million and over 1 million doses of vaccines. Overall,

EU's financial assistance to Moldova for the period 2014-2021 has amounted to €512 million in grants under the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument and €160 million for macro-financial assistance to support socio-economic development. In 2021, EU and Moldova also agreed on the adoption of 2021-2027 Association Agenda, listing the priorities to implement the Association Agreement and its DCFTA³⁷.

Such progress in Moldova's reform implementation brought the European Council to grant the country the candidate status on June 17, 2022, following its membership application submitted in March 2022 and the Commission's published opinion. Since then, the EU has also strengthened its support to Moldova in face of Russia's war against Ukraine. Moldova has indeed been directly impacted by the war, finding itself to tackle several challenges. These extend from the widespread of disinformation, violations of airspace and threats to energy supplies, to inflation and refugee crisis. As instance, in June 2023 the European Commission has presented a Support Package for the Republic of Moldova, indicating five priorities to counter the impact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and to bring Moldova closer to the EU. Recently, on December 14, 2023, the European Council opened accession negotiations with the country, elevating their relations to a higher step.

1.3. Progress in EU *Acquis* Alignment: Moldova and Ukraine's First Year as Candidate Countries to the EU Membership

After delineating how EU relations with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine evolved from an institutional and political point of view, reaching their peak with the opening of accession negotiations for both countries in December 2023, in this last section I will provide a comparative assessment of their progress in the implementation of the steps recommended by the Commission's Opinion on their membership application. Due to the relations of the European Commission's recommendations with the fundamental cluster in EU negotiations, the analysis will ultimately suggest the extent of political and economic integration of both countries with the EU. The fundamental cluster relates indeed to the sectors of freedom and security, justice, judiciary and fundamental rights, public procurement, financial control and statistics. As a reference point for my analysis, I will use the Commission's reports on both countries published in November 2023, along with publications from other national think tanks, indicating the results of the monitoring process for the first year of candidacy and the

³⁷ (European Commission, "Commission Opinion on the Republic of Moldova's Application for Membership of the European Union," COM/2022/406 final § (2022), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0406>).

evaluation made by certified experts. These primary official sources are fundamental to gaining a clear perspective on the countries' Europeanization efforts.

1.3.1. Political and Economic Integration: How Integrated Were Ukraine and Moldova Before Receiving Candidate Status?

The evaluation of the political and economic integration of Moldova and Ukraine with the EU will be based on the European Commission's Opinion on both countries' membership applications. Therein, the European Commission develops its opinion based on two macro-criteria, political and economic, as stipulated by the Copenhagen criteria, which, as I stated in the preliminary section related to the EU Enlargement Policy's accession conditions, are essential to determine the eligibility of states to the EU membership. The results reflect years of cooperation between Moldova and the EU, Ukraine and the EU, alongside the commitments both countries have implemented under the Association Agreement/DCFTA. The evaluation provided in this section will be purely descriptive and interleaved, meaning that I will constantly alternate the focus between Moldova and Ukraine. This approach will highlight the differences between the two countries prior to achieving the candidate status, to have a comprehensive overview of their improvements by 2023. This will also facilitate a better understanding of the factors affecting these changes, which will be further analyzed in the following chapters.

For the political criteria the assessment takes into account the respect of rule of law, stability of institutions, democracy, protection of minorities and human rights. At the time of the Commission's Opinion publication in June 2022, the commitment to democratic institutions in both countries is quite comparable, with the constitution guaranteeing the respect of rule of law, minorities and human rights, free and fair elections and all the foundational principles of a democratic state (Commissions' Opinion on Ukraine application for membership of the EU, 2022; Commissions' Opinion on Moldova application for membership of the EU, 2022). Both Ukraine and Moldova have established the constitutional court as the main interpreter and supervisor of the constitution, with the parliament serving as the sole legislative body, exercising oversight and democratic control over the government. However, in Moldova, the parliament's control and monitoring of the government's law implementation have not been extensively exercised, leading the European Commission to emphasize the need for further improvements to enhance the parliamentary institution's capacity. Regarding the electoral system, both in Moldova and Ukraine the elections, held respectively in 2021 and 2019, were competitive and fair, in

respect of the fundamental rights and freedoms. In Ukraine, a new Electoral Code was adopted in 2019, introducing the voting rights for internally displaced people (IDPs), enhanced access to people with disabilities and improved gender representation (Emerson and Movchan, 2021a). On the contrary, for Moldova, the Commission has underlined the need to address the recommendations of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), covering the impartiality of the Central Election Committee, efficient financial oversight of political campaigns and unbalanced media coverage (Emerson and Movchan, 2021b). When it comes to civil society, although both states support civil society activities, with Moldova also establishing an Action Plan for Civil Society Development, the impact of civil society in the Ukrainian society is higher, as well as its influence on national political reforms. Based on a rating created on the European Commission's methodology used in its evaluation of the Western Balkan countries, the implementation of civil society measures enshrined in Moldova and Ukraine's AA with the EU scored 3 for Ukraine and 2.5 for Moldova in 2021/2022³⁸. This means that although civil society is active in Moldova to hold the government accountable, its resources are limited. On the contrary, in Ukraine it enjoyed wider independence and competencies (Emerson et al., 2022b; Emerson et al., 2022a).

In public administration reforms, aimed at guaranteeing stability, neutrality, quality, a transparent and meritocratic recruitment system, Ukraine has a head start. In particular, on service delivery, Ukraine demonstrates a higher degree of government-citizen dialogue, digitalization and e-government mechanism, enhancing the transparency and reliability of the government's activities. In Public Financial Management (PFM) Moldova and Ukraine both have committed to enhance budget transparency, but although Ukraine has already adopted a Strategy Action Plan for PFM for the period 2022-2025, in line with the Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability evaluation, Moldova's one was still pending. Also in multi-level governance, Moldova has been urged to implement reforms aimed at giving local authorities more power and resources, while in Ukraine the decentralization reforms have been assessed as the most successful and impactful ever carried out. In Public Service and Human Resources Management both countries have been encouraged to improve, with the aim of creating a merit-based and professional public service, adequately remunerated and equally distributed among different ages and genders. However, while Ukraine already

³⁸ The rating is based on the methodology of the European Commission when annually assessing the Balkan states. 1 indicate some preparation, 2 moderate preparation and 3 good preparation. (Michael Emerson et al., "Opinion on Moldova's Application for Membership of the European Union," CEPS Policy Insights (Centre for European Policy Studies, May 2022)).

displays a legal framework, laying the ground for the development of a modern civil society, Moldova's political *impasse* affects its slow improvement in designing a legal framework for civil service. For policy development and coordination, as well as accountability of institutional bodies, Moldova and Ukraine's 2022 conditions are at the same level.

As pertains rule of law, both Ukraine and Moldova have been strongly committed to improve it, but Ukraine has been more efficient in reform implementation. In the field of justice system, both countries have embarked in a series of reforms to enhance judicial independence and the integrity of judges. In 2019 Ukraine also established the High Anti-Corruption Court, thanks to the support of international partners and civil society. In Moldova, on the contrary, the Superior Council of Magistracy's composition and appointment process were enhanced, always with the aim of reducing political influence and increase the independence of the judiciary. The Superior Council of Magistracy, along with the Superior Council of Prosecutors is responsible for the self-government of the judiciary. Nonetheless, Moldova still faces more challenges in reform implementation, especially concerning the integrity and independence of judges. Ukraine's reforms are more completed and benefit from greater international involvement to reform its high-level judiciary. In the field of anti-corruption, Moldova's government has been strongly committed, seeing a prioritization of this field. It has implemented the 2017-2023 Anti-corruption strategy and enhanced budget for anti-corruption institutions. Similarly, Ukraine has established the National Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecution Office as independent bodies after 2014. This has considerably improved transparency in public procurement and public administration's management and service delivery. In both cases, though, developments in high-level anti-corruption mechanisms still lack. Lastly, in organized crime, money laundering and law enforcement, Ukraine has presented a more coordinated approach, in comparison to Moldova. As instance, in 2020 Ukraine approved a Strategy on Combating Organized Crime and its specific Action Plan; in 2022 a threat assessment system and task forces have been put in place. In de-oligarchization both countries deal with lots of challenges in implementing reforms. While Ukraine has a more targeted legislation, the 'Anti-Oligarch Law' implemented in 2021, making this specificity more powerful to counter the influence of oligarchs in the political, economic and legal system, Moldova's de-oligarchization policies are just part of a broader engagement in anti-corruption.

To conclude with the part of political integration, the conditions of both countries in matter of protection of fundamental rights is also central to the discussion. Both countries

are signatories of the European Convention of Human Rights and have established a comprehensive legal framework for human rights and a national strategy. However, also in this domain, Ukraine has made progress, especially in gender-policies and anti-discrimination, whereas in Moldova discrimination against vulnerable groups is still high, despite the latter has implemented the Istanbul Convention on violence against women, compared to Ukraine which did not. Also, in terms of European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings, Moldova faces higher numbers of applications. In general, despite both countries' willingness to improve human rights' promotion, insufficient enforcement poses a decisive challenge, especially for Moldova due to more limited resources (Emerson and Movchan, 2021a; Emerson and Movchan, 2021b).

Shifting to the economic criteria, the assessment considers the existence of a functioning market economy and the ability to deal with market forces and competitive pressure. Building on this, Moldova is a small open economy, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) comparable to Ukraine, despite Ukraine's bigger extension. Their economic growth has been consistent, with Ukraine especially demonstrating greater resilience in ensuring financial and macroeconomic stability. Also, Moldova has demonstrated noteworthy improvements in macroeconomic policies, guaranteeing financial and business environment stability. However, its growth has been sometimes hampered by political instability and corruption and compared to Ukraine, which has addressed the inflation issue with the introduction in 2016 of an inflation-targeting framework by the National Bank, Moldova needs to do more to ensure a sustainable financial control mechanism. In Ukraine the introduction of the inflation-targeting framework has been crucial to keep the flexible exchange rate's stability, ultimately enhancing the national currency's confidence. In the financial sectors, both countries face challenges related to low financial intermediation and state interference in the banking system but reforms have been launched. Both countries also need to increase foreign direct investments to improve the business environment and the employment rate. However, differently from Ukraine, whose financial stability and currency's confidence has more potential to attract investments, for Moldova this will depend on its ability to address inefficiencies and market differentiation. Its economy is still too dependent on agriculture and the state's influence on energy is too high. Moldova is expected to cooperate more in the Energy Community with Ukraine and Romania in order to reduce its liability on Gazprom. In terms of free movement of goods, both countries have achieved good results, whereas, in the competition area, Moldova must enhance its efforts in market surveillance and monitoring, aligning to EU standards.

1.3.2. The European Commission's Recommendations for Moldova and Ukraine to Align with the EU Acquis

Based on the above description, Ukraine and Moldova's alignment with the EU *acquis*, which already started under the AA/DCFTA, shows both similarities and differences that affect their Europeanization process. Based on them, the European Commission issued its Opinion on their membership application in June 2022, making specific recommendations that Moldova and Ukraine must fulfill to advance in the accession process. These recommendations partly address the fundamental cluster, which is usually the first to be opened and the last to be closed in the accession negotiations. This includes the chapters of freedom and security, justice, judiciary and fundamental rights, public procurement, financial control and statistics. This overall evaluation suggests the level of political and economic integration of both countries with the EU and the potential to strengthen cooperation.

As seen in the previous subsection, Ukraine is in a more advantageous position with respect to Moldova. Indeed, although experiencing similar inefficiencies in justice, rule of law, anti-corruption, de-oligarchization, and organized crime, Ukraine has at least established a more comprehensive architecture to address them. The progress in these areas, while not the sole determinants of integration with the EU *acquis* and with the European Union in general, is indicative of the country's stronger effort to stabilize its institutions and democratize to better meet the standards set by the EU. This consideration stems from a theory underpinned by Schimmelfennig, according to which the EU's core assessment of acceding countries is based on the criterion of good governance. This implies that the more the candidate country's governance capacity aligns with the EU, the more integrated the state is, increasing its possibility to receive the full membership. As a result, according to Schimmelfennig, EU's standard of governance does not really consider cultural, economic or geographic criteria, but rather the extent of the countries' governance quality (Schimmelfennig, 2016). Therefore, a low level of governance capacity significantly hinders the effectiveness in policy implementation, thus hampering the accession process. The European Commission's recommendations to Moldova and Ukraine thus take into consideration the governance capacity of both countries, with the aim of narrowing the gap between them.

As acknowledged from the previous analysis, both Moldova and Ukraine necessitate a comprehensive judicial reform to enhance the impartiality and independence of judges.

The key difference between them, however, is that Moldova only started to build a legislative framework for judges' independence in 2021, whereas Ukraine had started earlier and is now primarily focused on implementing it (Nakashidze, 2024). Ukraine has been thus recommended to “enact and implement legislation on a selection procedure for judges of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine, including a pre-selection process based on evaluation of their integrity and professional skills, in line with the Venice Commission recommendations” (Commissions' Opinion on Ukraine application for membership of the EU, 2022). Contrarily, Moldova has been requested to “complete essential steps of the recently launched comprehensive justice system reform across all institutions in the justice and prosecution chains [...] including through efficient use of asset verification and effective democratic oversight; in particular, fill all the remaining vacancies of the Supreme Council Magistracy and in its specialised bodies” (Commissions' Opinion on Moldova application for membership of the EU, 2022). In this field, Ukraine has also been recommended to “finalise the integrity vetting of the candidates for the High Council of Justice members by the Ethics Council and the selection of candidate to establish the High Qualification Commission of Judges of Ukraine”.

The fight of corruption has also been included in the Commission's Opinion for both Ukraine and Moldova with the difference that Moldova's fight of corruption must be carried out at all levels, whereas Ukraine has been targeted towards specific provisions to be implemented. Moldova has been suggested to take “decisive steps towards proactive and efficient investigations, and a credible track record of prosecutions and convictions”, as well as to “increase the take up of the recommendations of the National Anticorruption Centre” (Commissions' Opinion on Moldova application for membership of the EU, 2022). Ukraine needs instead to enhance “the fight against corruption, particularly at high levels, through proactive and efficient investigations and a credible track record of prosecutions and convictions”. Moreover, it has been requested to “complete the appointment of a new head of the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office through certifying the identified winner of the competition and launch and complete the selection process and appointment for a new Director of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine” (Commissions' Opinion on Ukraine application for membership of the EU, 2022).

The same scenario appears also in the de-oligarchization and fight of organized crime framework. Indeed, while Ukraine has been requested by the Commission to just implement the pre-existing Anti-Oligarch Law (Nakashidze, 2024), Moldova has been recommended to enforce the commitment to de-oligarchization, meaning the establishment of a legislative

provisions as in Ukraine. As concerns the fight against organized crime, Moldova, though being a source, destination and transit for trafficking of all kinds, has an inexistent conviction rate (Nakashidze, 2024). On this ground it has been recommended to strengthen its efforts and “put in place a legislative package on asset recovery and a comprehensive framework for the fight against financial crime and money laundering, ensuring that anti-money laundering legislation is in compliance with the standards of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)” (Commissions’ Opinion on Moldova application for membership of the EU, 2022). Similarly, Ukraine has been suggested to “ensure that anti-money laundering legislation is in compliance with the standards of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)“, as well as to “adopt an overarching strategic plan for the reform of the entire law enforcement sector as part of Ukraine’s security environment” (Commissions’ Opinion on Ukraine application for membership of the EU, 2022). The latter commitment underlines once again the challenge of law enforcement for the country, rather than the need to build a clear legislative framework (Nakashidze, 2024).

In the area of human rights, considering the high diffusion of discrimination against minorities, the European Commission has suggested Moldova to “strengthen the protection of human rights, particularly of vulnerable groups, and sustain its commitments to enhance gender equality and fight violence against women” (Commissions’ Opinion on Moldova application for membership of the EU, 2022). For Ukraine, its request is again for enforcement mechanisms and finalization of the reforms implemented for national minorities (Commissions’ Opinion on Ukraine application for membership of the EU, 2022).

In the field of institutions and elections, Ukraine has been assessed more positively than Moldova, considering its adoption of the Electoral Code in 2019. However, it has been recommended to adopt a media law to comply with the EU audio-visual media services directive and strengthen the independence of media regulator (Commissions’ Opinion on Ukraine application for membership of the EU, 2022). For Moldova, although the 2021 elections were competitive and fair, the issues such as the lack of impartiality of the Central Election Committee, the absence of campaign finance monitoring and the unbalanced media coverage have been highlighted. Thus, it has been encouraged to address them, described as the shortcomings identified by OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe/the Venice Commission (Commissions’ Opinion on Moldova application for membership of the EU, 2022).

Lastly, Moldova has been asked to undertake three further steps in the context of public procurement, public administration, and civil society, where Ukraine shows more

advanced reforms. Specifically, it has been recommended that civil society involvement in decision-making be enhanced, public procurement system be improved, reforms in Public Financial Management be finalized, and public administration reforms be stepped up, including an update of the strategy for these reforms (Commissions' Opinion on Moldova application for membership of the EU, 2022).

Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine
Counter political polarisation, in the spirit of 19 April Agreement		
Improve democratic oversight		
Improve electoral framework		
Appointment of Ombudsman	Public administration reform	
Judicial reform	Judicial reform	Judicial reform
Strengthen anti-corruption agency	Fight corruption at all levels	Fight against corruption
De-oligarchisation	De-oligarchisation	De-oligarchisation
Fight against organised crime	Fight against organised crime	
	Asset recovery, money laundering	Anti-money laundering legislation
	Improve public procurement	
Media freedoms		Media vested interests
Human rights of vulnerable groups	Strengthen human rights	National minorities
Gender equality		
	Enhance civil society role	

Figure 1: Critical areas in which the European Commission proposed recommendations (also Georgia is included but to the aim of my analysis only Moldova and Ukraine will be considered).

1.3.3. Alignment with the EU Acquis: Assessing Ukraine and Moldova's Progress after One Year as Candidate Countries from a Policy Perspective

In this last part of the chapter, I will look into the reforms implemented by Ukraine and Moldova throughout the first year as candidate countries. In general, the analysis will consider the overall progress in the fundamental cluster, which, as previously stated, suggests the extent of political and economic integration of both countries with the EU. Intuitively, these reforms pertain the recommendations made by the European Commission in the occasion of the publication of its Opinion on Ukraine and Moldova's membership. The goal of this subsection is, therefore, that of illustrating the progress of both Moldova and Ukraine in the accession process, providing an objective description of the policies they have implemented. In the conclusion, I will offer a general assessment of their

Europeanization, which will serve as a preliminary analysis for my study on the factors influencing it.

Starting with the political criteria, both Moldova and Ukraine have made good progress in guaranteeing democracy and stability of institutions, with the parliament outstandingly carrying out its legislative activities related to EU integration reforms. In Moldova, a new Electoral Code has been adopted (“Key Findings of the 2023 Report on the Republic of Moldova” 2023). It has introduced the ban to run for elections for members of political parties declared unconstitutional by the constitutional court and has introduced changes related to the composition and appointment method for the members of the Central Electoral Commission. However, numerous OSCE/ODIHR recommendations still need to be completed, particularly those regulating third parties’ involvement in elections campaigns and ensuring the liability of campaign finance and the transparency of political party funding. Some reforms in the electoral legislation are expected also from Ukraine, to address the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations (“Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Ukraine”, 2023). Moreover, in the area of civil society, Moldova has made some improvements. Notably, the Parliament has passed a law on public interest information, which includes a Platform for dialogue and participation of the civil society in the decision-making process (Ermurachi et al., 2023). In spite of this, challenges remain in the implementation of the Platform and the transparency of the process. Conversely, civil society is very active and independent in Ukraine, raising no concerns.

On the rule of law, both countries have made remarkable strides. Despite the challenges posed by Russian aggression, Ukraine has ensured the good capability of justice services, with most courts maintaining a 100% clearance rate, and has continued to implement reforms to improve judicial bodies’ integrity (“Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Ukraine” 2023). In August 2023, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a bill to reintroduce special vetting processes for candidates to serve as judges on the Constitutional Court of Ukraine. The legislation was implemented through the establishment of the Advisory Group of Experts (AGE) composed of international professionals, entitled by international organizations to initiate the competition for the position of judges of the constitutional court. The new law No. 9322 will enable to fill five vacant positions in the Constitutional Court of Ukraine through a new procedure. After the AGE initiates the procedure, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and the Congress of Judges are asked to express their vote (Центр “Нова Європа”, 2023). Although the Verkhovna Rada’s involvement in appointing judges to the constitutional court has been criticized for political influence,

Ukraine has fulfilled the European Commission's recommendation. Besides this, the second step has been implemented by Ukraine with the re-establishment of the High Qualification Commission of Judges (HQCJ) and the High Council of Judges (HCJ) through a merit-based and transparent mechanism. This reform has helped to fill 2000 judicial vacancies ("Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Ukraine" 2023). In general, Ukraine has demonstrated great resilience, high clearance rates, and judicial capability throughout 2022, despite the challenges posed by the war. Ukraine's efforts have also focused on the punishment of perpetrators committing international crimes. This has involved the establishment of prosecuting and investigation offices, leading to the indictment of 267 people, in cooperation with the International Criminal Court (ICC), Eurojust, Europol and others ("Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Ukraine" 2023). Shifting to Moldova, it has launched several reforms in the justice sector too. As instance, it has implemented the Commission's recommendation of introducing a pre-vetting process for candidates to the Superior Council of Prosecutors and the Superior Council of Magistracy and has passed a law to reform the Supreme Court of Justice, including the consolidation of the Judicial inspection's activities and the modification of the legislation regarding the National Institute of Justice and the prosecution process (Ermurachi et al., 2023). However, Moldova has failed to implement the recommendation of the Venice Commission aimed at addressing lengthy proceedings, large backlog of cases and low clearance rates ("Key Findings of the 2023 Report on the Republic of Moldova" 2023). Moreover, no progress has been seen in the prosecution of perpetrators of criminal activities and high-ranking corruption cases, contrarily to Ukraine, and the law reforming the court system to make it more efficient is still pending completion.

Also, in the area of fighting against corruption, although the two countries have made some progress, Ukraine has done better than Moldova. Indeed, it has consolidated an anti-corruption framework, by the adoption of a national anti-corruption strategy with the respective action plan for its implementation. Moreover, the new Heads of the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) have been selected through a transparent and merit-based procedure involving independent experts, fulfilling the Commission's third step (Центр "Нова Європа", 2023). Since their selection, they have accelerated the investigation and adjudication of high-level anticorruption cases. Nonetheless, Ukraine should continue to stick with the commitments under the 2023-2025 anti-corruption program. As regards Moldova, a key achievement has been the implementation of the new law on whistleblowers and an increasing of investigation for major cases by the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office

(APO). Still, improvements are needed in the division of competences between the National Anticorruption Centre (NAC) and the National Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office (NAPO), in the general enforcement mechanisms for investigations and the non-implementation of the NAC recommendations. In addition, although the number of convictions have increased compared to the previous year, the number of corruption cases brought to court has decreased (Ermurachi et al., 2023).

Moldova has also made some progress in the fight of organized crime, fulfilling the fifth step recommended by the European Commission. It has implemented the Internal Affairs Development Strategy for the years 2022-2030, showing progress in financial crimes and recovering assets (also belonging to oligarchs). The country has been also active in the confiscation of assets linked to organized crime, expanding its cooperation in the field with EU member states and EU agencies. A national program for the combat of terrorism and new provisions for preventing and fighting money laundering has been adopted too ("Key Findings of the 2023 Report on the Republic of Moldova" 2023). For Ukraine, despite its resilience during a challenging moment, no notable improvements have been made in the first year³⁹. In June 2023, the government adopted the resolution No. 662, detailing the procedures to supervise over entities engaged in the monitoring of financial activities, ultimately to prevent money laundering. Regarding law enforcement, a strategic plan for the period 2023-2027 has been put in place through presidential decree, to reform the agencies responsible for law enforcement, aligning with EU standards in the defense and security sector. Lastly, Ukraine has improved its commitment to antiterrorism, through the ratification of the Additional Protocol to the Convention of the Council of Europe on Prevention of Terrorism (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2023).

In the area of de-oligarchization, Moldova has enacted a comprehensive action plan aimed at limiting political influence over financial decisions. The creation of the Directorate for Supervision and Control of the Financing of Political Parties and Electoral Campaigns has been a significant step, tasked with securing the transparency and accountability of political parties' financing. In this realm, new regulations for the functioning of the state-owned companies have been designed too, to guarantee the accountability and integrity of board members and their salary (Ermurachi et al., 2023). For Ukraine, no progress has been made in the first year, due to uncertainties in the Commission's recommendation ("Центр "Нова Європа", 2023). After June 2023, a resolution was adopted to establish a register of

³⁹ Relevant laws were adopted after summer 2023, so they are not included in the analysis (which is until June 2023).

people influential in the public sector. Moreover, two laws were enacted as part of the fight against oligarchism: Law No.3295-IX aimed at enhancing economic competition and strengthening the Antimonopoly Committee of Ukraine and Law No. 3337-IX, aimed at confirming the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) competence in monitoring the proper use of public funds and the ensuring the compliance of political parties with legislative provisions (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2023).

As concerns fundamental rights, Ukraine has made progress in aligning its legislation with international standards to prevent ill-treatment and torture in detention facilities. It has enhanced data protection, collaboration with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and international organizations for supervising human rights' conditions and has promoted a campaign to educate its citizens to learn and defend their rights. In terms of its commitments to the European Commission, in the area of media freedom Ukraine has fully carried out the recommendations made. It passed Law No. 2849-IX to harmonize Ukraine's media legislation with the EU's Directive in matter of audio-visual media service and other amendments to improve consumer protection and the advertising sector from external influences (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2023). Its media environment is now open and free, although sometimes risky for journalists and media officers. Also, in the protection of national minorities, Ukraine has enhanced the legislative measures to better their conditions and access to social welfare and employment. These measures have been mainly addressed towards ethnic minorities and IDPs. Moldova has not showed the same results in fundamental rights, with policies lacking effectiveness, time efficiency and inter-institutional dialogue among government agencies ("Key Findings of the 2023 Report on the Republic of Moldova" 2023). The National Program on combating and preventing domestic violence and violence against women has been criticized for its ineffectiveness in addressing the issue. However, some steps further have been made to enhance equality and non-discrimination. In particular, criteria for assessing discrimination have been expanded and a gender budgeting mechanism has been introduced to promote gender equality (Ermurachi et al., 2023).

To conclude with the implementation of the European Commission's recommended steps, in public administration Moldova has made some progress. Although for Ukraine reforms in this sector have not been urged, some advancements have been made too. Regarding Moldova, in March 2023 it adopted a new public administration reform strategy and its action plan, as requested by the EU, in order to address issues related to public officials' remuneration, competences and to enhance the fiscal autonomy of local public

administrations. In addition, reforms in Public Financial Management have been fully implemented, as well as regulations on public procurement (Ermurachi et al., 2023). On the contrary, in Ukraine, the pace of reforms in recruitment procedures, salaries and job classifications has slowed down due to the ongoing war. The conflict has also hampered the government's ability to implement the policy plan for European integration, with martial law particularly undermining the openness and merit-based principle of civil service recruitment. However, martial law has also had some positive outcomes, such as that of simplifying the procurement system, while always guaranteeing its transparency and competitiveness. Despite the challenges, public administration reform has remained a top priority on Ukraine's political agenda, and digitalization and public service delivery have strongly performed. ("Public administration in Ukraine: Assessment against the Principles of Public Administration", 2023). Overall, Ukraine continues to lead in the area of public administration, although Moldova has consistently demonstrated commitment over the last year by enhancing accountability, service delivery and establishing a more structured approach, alongside a legislative framework to underpin its EU integration's efforts ("Public administration in the Republic of Moldova: Assessment against the Principles of Public Administration", 2023). Concerning European integration, Moldova has not yet adopted a specific plan detailing the procedure it intends to adopt to align with the EU *acquis*, while Ukraine is already at a more advanced stage.

Finally, in terms of economic integration, during the first year of candidacy, Ukraine has gone through serious economic hurdles due to the ongoing conflict. This situation has exacerbated its economic stability, compared to Moldova. Nonetheless, Moldova, much like Ukraine, struggles to cope with market forces and competitiveness and needs more investments in education, digital services and infrastructure. Although Ukraine also faces these issues, it can rely more on international aid to support future reconstruction efforts (Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Ukraine", 2023; Key Findings of the 2023 Report on The Republic of Moldova", 2023).

Conclusion

The chapter traced the evolution of EU-Moldova, EU-Ukraine relations from a historical perspective, mainly highlighting the legal framework that has been the backdrop for their cooperation from a political and economic perspective. Then it explained in detail the two main policies that have affected the EU's relationship with its neighbors, emphasizing how the EU Enlargement Policy has returned to the center of the EU's CFSP objectives. Prompted

by security needs, the EU expanded eastward, to the point of granting Moldova and Ukraine the privilege of opening EU accession negotiations in December 2023. These two Eastern European countries have consistently demonstrated a strong interest in transposing EU values and laws into their own systems. The last section specifically addressed their alignment with the EU *acquis*, initially under the Association Agreement and subsequently on the basis of the recommendations published by the European Commission upon confirming their eligibility as candidates for the EU membership.

In conclusion to this first part of the study on the integration of Ukraine and Moldova with the political and economic principles foundational to the European experience, it is now possible to attempt to answer the first research question at the core of this thesis: "Is Ukraine further along than Moldova in the process of Europeanization?" While Europeanization encompasses more than just aligning candidate countries with the *acquis communautaire*, based on certain aspects, it is evident that Ukraine is at a more advanced stage, especially when it comes to public administration reforms, implementation of the anti-oligarchy law, inclusion of civil society in the decision-making process, and combating gender and ethnic discrimination. However, it is important to recognize that over the past year, Moldova has dedicated itself to implementing the Commissions' recommendations, demonstrating its commitment to join the European Union family. The areas of fundamental rights, anti-corruption and the justice system posed significant challenges to Moldova, yet notable strides were made in the inclusion of civil society into decision-making, in the electoral system and public administration reforms. Overall, although Moldova fulfilled its June 2022 commitments by becoming a candidate for membership, Ukraine's efficiency and implementation capacity were greater, although it too faced challenges, especially in anti-corruption reforms and slowdowns in public administration reforms. Additionally, the wartime context in which the country operates cannot be overlooked; despite this, its institutions have remarkably carried out their commitments to European integration. Providing a straightforward answer to the research question is thus complicated, considering the significant strides made by both countries. However, drawing from Schimmelfennig's principle of "good governance", Ukraine's better management of public administration and European integration policies may significantly impact on its faster Europeanization pace.

Therefore, the following chapters will explore the factors contributing to this faster pace and superior governance in Ukraine during its first year as an EU candidate country. Before delving into that, the next chapter will introduce the concept of Europeanization, illustrating its theoretical foundations.

CHAPTER 2

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE EUROPEANIZATION PROCESS AND THE METHODOLOGY TO INVESTIGATE IT: STRUCTURAL AND ACTOR-CENTERED APPROACH

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined the relations of the EU with Moldova and Ukraine, concentrating on two policy frameworks through which the EU cooperates and interacts with neighboring countries: the European Neighborhood Policy and the EU Enlargement Policy. Particularly, I focused on the procedures and conditions regulating the accession of candidate states to the EU, as envisaged by the EU Enlargement Policy. This policy has been analyzed in the context of the new wave of EU eastward enlargement, initiated in response to security concerns triggered by Russia's 2022 aggression against Ukraine. Moldova and Ukraine are included in this new round, and their alignment with the EU *acquis*, preconditional for their accession to the EU, has been extensively analyzed. The analysis highlighted the adaptation of the two countries' legal, political and economic provisions to those of the EU, revealing a generally faster pace for Ukraine. This finding supports the first hypothesis that Ukraine is further along in the integration process, compared to Moldova, prompting a search for valid explanations to confirm it. Schimmelfennig's principle of "good governance" has thus suggested a possible way to support this thesis, grounded on the idea that better governance capacity facilitates the transposition of new norms into the regulatory system, thereby driving deeper integration into the EU normative structure. This idea builds on the theory that rigorous and effective governance capacity leads to better performance. Indeed, this is intrinsically connected to the concept of administrative capacity, which relates to a government's improved ability to manage human and physical resources to reach its objectives. The ability of the public administration to coordinate plans, resources and actions serves as a crucial defense against external threats and as a driving force for development (El-Taliawi and Van Der Wal, 2019).

However, acknowledging Ukraine's greater governance capacity provides only a simplistic policy explanation for why Ukraine is progressing faster in its integration into the EU. Indeed, studying a country's integration into a specific organization or system involves more than just policy implementation. The process of Europeanization encompasses a wide variety of forms in which it can occur and varies across different dimensions, such as polity

and politics. Consequently, some scholars focus more on the effects of Europeanization on political parties and competition – politics – or on the organization of national executives and judiciary – polity – (Sedelmeier, 2006). Moreover, some scholars explain the “European choice” of candidate states based on rational interests and circumstances, while others based on identity-related similarities (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). Additionally, a consistent number of academics focus more on the reaction and adaptation of domestic institutions to EU external pressures, while others examine how European values and principles come to be internalized, influenced by domestic political and administrative conditions, ultimately leading to identity change (Tanil, 2014).

The aim of the second chapter is thus to provide a theoretical foundation for the study of Europeanization in neighboring and candidate countries. This will establish the basis for the empirical analysis I will carry out in the following chapters, related to the factors affecting Ukraine’s faster Europeanization pace. The chapter will be divided into three sections. The first section will be dedicated to explaining the concept of Europeanization and the external factors affecting it, namely the EU’s pressure on candidate countries through direct and indirect tools such as conditionality and socialization. Here, the theory of Normative Power Europe (NPE), which underpins the discussion about the EU’s influential role as universally recognized normative force, will also be presented. The second section will focus on the theories of Europeanization, specifically the rationalist and the social constructivist institutional approaches, which serve as two frameworks for explaining why candidate and neighboring countries decide to undertake a Europeanization process. The discussion will also expand to domestic factors impacting the process’s outcomes, namely domestic political and administrative structures, and values. Finally, the last section will be devoted to explaining the methodology I will use to inquire about the main factors contributing to Ukraine’s faster Europeanization pace.

2.1. External Factors Driving Europeanization: EU’s Normative Power as the Trigger to Integration

Europeanization and European integration are two faces of the same coin, or, as Tanil Gamze put it in *The Social Constructivist Fusion Perspective: A Theory for Europeanization* (2014), the “uploading” and “downloading” parts of an interrelated exchange process. In the context of mutual modification, where EU structures affect and modify the state’s structure and vice versa, European integration represents the uploading part of the process, whereas Europeanization represents the outcome. Hence, Tanil describes Europeanization as the

result of “the impact of the EU-level political culture, norms, values and working methods on member-states” (Tanil, 2014). Extending this concept to candidate or acceding states, Europeanization presupposes the exercise of EU power, able to generate changes in their domestic structures. This power was called “Normative Power Europe” by Ian Manners in one of his articles published in 2002.

According to Manners’ theory, which aims to depart from the classical Westphalian conventions of civilian and military power, acknowledging the EU’s normative dimension means recognizing its ideational, cognitive and symbolic force. Its unique constitutional norms, historical foundation and hybrid polity form its international identity and provide the basis for its external relations (Manners, 2002). These relations are grounded in the pursuit of the principles of rule of law, democracy, fundamental freedoms and safeguarding of human rights, demonstrating EU’s commitment to United Nations (UN) and ECtHR values.

In the context of enlargement, EU norms, ideas, structures, and rules spread beyond its borders through the ENP and the EU Enlargement Policy, as widely discussed in the previous chapter. In practical terms, the EU’s normative power is diffused through direct and indirect mechanisms. Conditionality and socialization are the core direct tools, while transnational incentives, socialization, externalization, and imitation serve as the indirect ones. All these mechanisms lead to Europeanization in targeted states. Conditionality operates through incentives – whether financial, economic, or political – that the EU promises to third countries, while socialization operates through persuasion. Transnational socialization, externalization and incentives use EU societal actors in third countries to persuade their governments to adopt EU rules. In the specific context of candidate states, the EU also uses gatekeeping, benchmarking and monitoring, financial assistance and twinning (Grabbe, 2001). Gatekeeping is a mechanism based on conditionality, whereby a candidate state can advance in the accession process only if it satisfies the prior requirements. Benchmarking and monitoring typically involve the submission of progress reports specific for each country to update EU and national institutions on the state of advancement, whereas twinning is a mechanism that facilitates the direct learning and adaptation of new models already used by other states to the candidate country’s legislative, institutional, economic and administrative settings.

However, the Europeanization driven by the EU’s impact on third countries, as an external force leading the process, represents just one side of the story. To have a comprehensive understanding of the Europeanization process, one should look not only at the external factor, namely, the pressure exerted by the EU, but also at how domestic

structures respond to it, which ultimately depends on the traditions, values and principles upon which these structures and institutions are built. Only by the domestic factors it is possible to understand why the pace of Europeanization varies so greatly among candidate countries. Therefore, the next section aims to introduce the theoretical foundations for the study of Europeanization, providing a closer look at the internal forces driving neighboring and candidate states toward the adoption of EU rules, principles and values. This will help to conduct my empirical analysis in the next chapter, to investigate why Ukraine is “Europeanizing” faster than Moldova.

2.2. The Influence of Domestic Factors: The Rationalist and Social Constructivist Institutional Approaches to the Empirical Analysis

There are two main approaches to analyzing Europeanization in neighboring and candidate states: the rationalist institutional approach and the social constructivist institutional approach. What both approaches have in common is their institutional focus, emphasizing the EU’s impact on domestic institutions and governance systems. However, the two approaches differ in that they assume two distinct logics. The rationalist approach is anchored to the idea that states decide to enlarge when the benefits of expansion exceed the costs, following a logic of consequentiality. In contrast, the social constructivist approach explains enlargement through a logic of appropriateness, focusing on the extent to which a state identifies, from an identity and cultural perspective, with the organization in question. In both cases, whether the benefits outweigh the costs or the identification with the values and norms of the organization is strong, the country will seek closer institutional ties with it (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). These two approaches complement the previous discussion on the EU’s normative power by adding the elements of recipient states’ interests and cultural identification to the explanation of Europeanization. Thus, Europeanization is not merely influenced by the EU’s normative and conditionality pressures, but also by cost-benefit calculations and the sense of cultural and identity-based belonging of the recipient state to the EU.

From a practical viewpoint, when states perceive a cultural connection with the EU or when the benefits of cooperation and integration exceed the costs, they embark on a process of learning or adaptation of EU norms (Tanil, 2014). The main distinction between these processes is that, in the case of learning, the state is aware of its own values and critically examine them, learning from the EU’s tradition. In this scenario, when the state’s existing knowledge is challenged by external influence, an “ideational vacuum” (Tanil,

2014) emerges, where elites become sensitive to any change and cognitive frames are rearranged. In this vacuum, the state must decide which path to take, and a new “ideational equilibrium” is eventually established. Hence, Europeanization may be defined as an adaptive process (Olsen, 2002) and, particularly, a process, which is not universal or predetermined, but rather dependent on the domestic structures’ configuration and on domestic choices.

Therefore, we expect that in a country where there is a stronger identification with European values or where the institutional setting facilitates the transposition of EU norms, the likelihood of a more linear process of Europeanization of its institutional and governance system is higher. According to March and Olsen divergence thesis: “Organizations interpret external pressures to change in terms of their existing norms and conceptions of legitimate political forms” (Kassim, Peters, and Wright, 2000). Acknowledging this, a significant portion of the literature on Europeanization studies the process in relation to its influence over political parties and competition, as well as over national coordination systems. National executives, as well as political parties, do not simply change passively based on EU directives but adapt to them according to their political and administrative traditions (Goetz, 2000). This is also due to the absence of institutional models imposed and widespread by the EU (Grabbe, 2001), leaving considerable discretion to the states.

These findings underline the complexity of the Europeanization process and the centrality of both internal and external factors in molding the outcomes. The final section will focus on the two methodologies that will provide the structure for the last two chapters and through which both external and domestic factors will be investigated.

2.3. Structural and Actor-Centered Methodology

In the first chapter, the examination of the policies implemented by Ukraine and Moldova during their first year of candidacy revealed a clear advantage for the former compared to the latter. This led us to conclude that Ukraine’s integration into the EU and the Europeanization of its political, economic, institutional, and social structures is proceeding faster than Moldova’s. To underpin this statement, Schimmelfennig’s concept of ‘good governance’ was brought into discussion, stating that better governance performance facilitates the adaptation to the EU *acquis*, thus accelerating the Europeanization process. Although this provides a valid explanation for the second research question at the core of my thesis, it does not delve deeper into the reasons why Ukraine’s governance and public administration systems are more efficient than Moldova’s, or whether the EU’s external

pressure indeed has a meaningful impact. Moreover, it neglects other internal factors that may be relevant, such as the impact of ideas, values and the role of political elites. Therefore, my study will employ on a methodology that classifies the factors possibly affecting the Europeanization of institutional and governance structures into structural and actor-centered factors. Among them a further distinction will be made between internal and external factors.

Structural factors refer to the institutional and systemic elements that model and limit the opportunities and behaviors of actors in a society (Sewell, 1992). The higher the cost of transforming these elements, the lower the outcomes in terms of alignment with EU practices and norms (Buscaneanu and Li, 2024). Based on this consideration, the first part of the third chapter will ideally compare EU rewards with the costs of modifying internal consolidated structures, conducting a cost-benefit assessment of membership (Buscaneanu and Li, 2024). Acknowledging consistency and credibility in the EU's behavior and membership promises, EU rewards will be measured in terms of their capacity to foster economy growth through foreign direct investments (FDIs) ("The Push-Pull between Geopolitics and Domestic Resistance: Lessons from the 2004 Enlargement of the EU", 2024). When talking about the EU, the discourse extends to member states, which are actively engaged with both candidate countries, contributing to their integration into the EU, through experiential learning (Olsen, 2002). In addition, the perception of Russia's threat will be considered another significant external factor possibly accelerating Ukraine's Europeanization due to the relevance it has acquired over the last two years and the risk to the country's security. On the contrary, the costs of domestic transformation will include, as internal structural factors, the socioeconomic, cultural and institutional elements in which actors operate, which tend to persist over time. These include the system of government and power-sharing, as well as the influence exerted by the political opposition (Buscaneanu and Li, 2024), in terms of institutional resilience. Moreover, the reliability of public procurement system and the availability of natural resources will be considered as socioeconomic factors. Lastly, the cultural aspect will address the public identification with EU values, the citizens' support for integration, and the perception of Russia and the Soviet-inherited culture.

However, institutional changes can also be driven by the interests and decisions taken by individual or collective actors, such as organizations, elites of political leaders, to attain their goals (Dimitrova and Toshkov, 2007). This is especially true in Central and Eastern European countries with a common Soviet legacy, where the composition of the executive affects the country's political and socioeconomic orientation. Accordingly, part of the literature on Europeanization emphasizes the role of individual or collective actors in

shaping outcomes, adopting an actor-centered approach which highlights power struggle and political dynamics as primary drivers behind institutional reforms. This approach focuses on the capacity of actors (whether collective, individual or organizational) to influence structural changes and make decisions (Dimitrova and Toshkov, 2007). The last part of the third chapter will thus analyze both the internal and external actor-centered factors. Internally, the leadership of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Moldova's President Maia Sandu will be examined to understand how their power may have gained trust and, concurrently, affected the support of the EU for both countries' integration efforts. It is relevant to evaluate not only their political orientation and interaction with the elites or with the opposition but also their leadership capacity, through which they secure the support from the population. Externally, how EU countries and their populations perceive Moldova and Ukraine will be assessed, as the external representation of both countries can influence the general perception of their engagement and advancements in the Europeanization trajectory.

Conclusion

The chapter has provided a theoretical foundation for the methodology that it will be used to the empirical analysis that will be carried out in the following chapter, related to the structural and actor-centered factors affecting the prioritization and effectiveness of Europeanization in Moldova and Ukraine. After describing the normative power of the EU, providing a general explanation of the influence which the EU is able to generate over neighboring and candidate countries, the chapter has illustrated the two approaches generally deployed to delineate the reasons affecting the countries' decision to "Europeanize". Indeed, the latter are pushed both by rational interests and cultural affiliation to EU ideas and values, thus corroborating the thesis that Europeanization is not just the outcome of EU conditionality pressure, but also the result of domestic factors affecting it. Building on this, the last section has put together the two methodological approaches, structural and actor-centered, with internal and external factors, clarifying each of them. The following chapter will assess their relevance in terms of Europeanization push.

CHAPTER 3

UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA IN COMPARISON: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND EXTERNAL EU INFLUENCES ON THEIR EUROPEANIZATION PROCESS

Introduction

This final chapter will be dedicated to the empirical analysis of the factors that have accelerated Ukraine's Europeanization in the year under study compared to Moldova, addressing the second research question central to my thesis. The hypothesis guiding my research is that the observed phenomenon is not the result of a unique factor but rather a combination of multiple circumstances. To scrutinize it, my methodology will be based on a distinction between structural and actor-centered factors, a categorization frequently used in the Europeanization literature. To provide a balanced assessment I will always alternate the focus between Ukraine and Moldova.

The chapter will be structured into four main sections. The first section will be devoted to the analysis of structural internal elements. This will inspect the constitutional, institutional and political architecture of both Moldova and Ukraine, assessing how their inherent resilience has affected the adaptation of the national legislation to the EU *acquis*. Moreover, this part will examine the cultural affiliation of each country with the EU and their availability of natural resources, to understand each country's strategic position within the EU, towards Russia and their need for integration. The second section, covering the external structural elements, will discuss the EU (and EU member states) influence through FDIs. The normative power of the EU will be assessed by the exploring the degree to which citizens identify with the EU, indicating the attractiveness of EU values. In addition, these two sections will briefly mention each country's stance towards Russia and the reliability of their public procurement systems, as factors influencing investor confidence.

The third and fourth part will shift the attention to actor-centered factors. The former will delve into the leadership capacities of Moldovan President Maia Sandu and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, giving prominence to their roles in stimulating the reform process necessary for European integration. The latter will explore external perceptions, meaning how Moldova and Ukraine are viewed by EU countries and their populations. This aspect is fundamental, as it might sway the Western academic community's assessment of each country's alignment with EU values and principles, consequently affecting how Moldovan and Ukrainian nationals perceive their acceptance within the EU community.

3.1. The Impact of Internal Structural Factors' Resilience on the Europeanization Process of Moldova and Ukraine

As I mentioned in the methodological part of the second chapter, structural elements refer to the elements that are part of the political, institutional, socioeconomic and cultural heritage of a country. Their common feature is the uneasy adaptation to the changing environment, making them fundamental to investigate the frictions and agreements in terms of the country's alignment to the EU project. The study of internal structural elements suggests the peculiarities of domestic structures that accelerate or undermine the process, whereas the external refer to the impact of EU political and economic choices *vis-à-vis* the countries, which the latter cannot control.

For the internal elements, the first part intends to explore the constitutional and institutional setting of both countries. The way in which the path towards the EU and its connected reform process is regulated and managed by the public authorities, as well as its effectiveness and coordination, significantly influence the speed of alignment with the EU *acquis*. In this regard, the first and the second subsections will analyze the constitutional provisions of Moldova and Ukraine, underscoring the prioritization of the European path in their national strategic courses, and the institutional configuration concerning the management and coordination capacities of the reform processes. In addition, a quick reference will be made to the diplomatic relations with EU member states that meaningfully influence the choices of Moldova and Ukraine. Indeed, a country which is structurally connected to the countries already part of the Union can leverage their experiences and recommendations, applying these insights to their domestic context. This dynamic is also affected by the country's identification with the values and principles of the EU, which will be another focus of this section. Finally, the latter will conclude with the exploration of the energy resources present in both countries, to understand how the availability of these resources affects the countries' political orientation towards the EU or Russia.

Concerning the external elements, their structural character stems from the country's inability to control and alter them, driven as they are by external actors, as well as from the normative power of the EU, which can attract any state that identifies with its principles. This discussion includes both the cultural affiliation of the states with the EU, discussed in the fourth subsection of the part dedicated to the internal factors, and the actual pressure exerted by the EU through financial leverage, discussed in the second part. It is clear that a country recording greater investments in its territory is much more incentivized to reciprocate, in this case, by strongly committing to reforms.

3.1.1. Moldova's Constitutional Neutrality in Foreign Policy vs. Ukraine's Codified European Orientation: An Overview of both Countries' Constitutional Texts

The constitution is the primary source of law in the normative system's hierarchy, dictating how the country domestically coordinates and cooperates with foreign states. Its structural character derives from its resilient nature, making it extremely difficult to amend. In the context of European integration, the constitution may establish the structure to coordinate the reform process for the alignment with the EU *acquis*. This may indicate the country's prioritization of the European course. The Moldovan and Ukrainian experience differentiate exactly for the presence, in the case of Ukraine, and absence, in the case of Moldova, of constitutional provisions regulating the process of integration and alignment with the EU *acquis*, as well as the safeguard of the people's European identity.

In 2019, Ukraine did a significant leap forward in its path towards European integration, adding new provisions to the constitution. In the preamble it was added that the Verkhovna Rada⁴⁰ of Ukraine “confirms the European identity of the Ukrainian people and the irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic course” (Stetsiuk, 2023). Such a modification indicates, not only the country's strong commitment to integration, but also the prioritization of EU reforms to accelerate the accession of the country in the Union.

According to the new version, the Parliament is in charge for creating the domestic and foreign policy entrusting that it will drive the state towards full membership of Ukraine in the EU and NATO⁴¹. The Cabinet of Ministers oversees the implementation of the entire strategic course⁴², while the President is the final guarantor for all the processes⁴³.

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the desire to integration became seen as a milestone to ensure the physical existence of Ukrainian people. Thus, Resolution 2483-IX “On Some Measures to Fulfill Ukraine's Obligations in the Field of European Integration” was adopted by the Verkhovna Rada to reinforce its commitment towards European integration. Here, the Verkhovna Rada, together with the Cabinet of Ministers, was given the task of drafting laws to fulfill its reform obligations towards the EU. Special

⁴⁰ The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine is the Ukrainian unicameral Parliament.

⁴¹ (Art. 85, Constitution of Ukraine, “Ukraine 1996 (Rev. 2019) Constitution - Constitute” (2019), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Ukraine_2019).

⁴² (Art. 116, Constitution of Ukraine, “Ukraine 1996 (Rev. 2019) Constitution - Constitute” (2019), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Ukraine_2019).

⁴³ (Art. 102 Constitution of Ukraine, “Ukraine 1996 (Rev. 2019) Constitution - Constitute” (2019), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Ukraine_2019).

committees were specifically asked to approve the drafting and prepare the text for the first reading⁴⁴.

On the contrary, as of today, Moldova's Constitution does not mention the country's irreversible path towards European integration, nor does it regulate the adoption and implementation of reforms to align with the EU *acquis*. Rather, Art. 11 envisions the "permanent neutrality"⁴⁵ of the country, indicating its neutral stance in international relations. Clearly, this does not imply that the people of Moldova are not interested in integrating; however, the specification in the Constitution of the country's clear stance and protection of the people's European identity would influence the reform process and ensure the prioritization of European integration as national strategic objective. This issue was acknowledged by Moldovan authorities, with President Maia Sandu raising the proposal of a referendum for constitutional amendments scheduled for October 20, 2024. The aim of the referendum question "Do you support Moldova's accession to the European Union?" attains, in case of affirmative answer by at least half of Moldovan citizens, to enshrine the clause of irreversibility of the European course and affirm the European identity in the Preamble. Moreover, Title V "European integration" would be added to the Constitution, establishing the supremacy of EU legislation over national legislation (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, 2024).

The analysis of constitutional provisions on European integration should not be seen as directly influencing the dynamism with which institutions evaluate proposed laws for alignment with European norms. Nevertheless, it is crucial in framing the country's level of involvement in the European Union from an ethical, cultural and identity perspective. The constitution, I reiterated at the outset, forms the foundation of a state, embodying the values and principles upon which it is built. The lack of a clear declaration of Moldova's direction towards the European Union not only suggests hesitation to bestow the country with a distinct European connotation, moving it away from its historically affirmed "neutrality", but it could also be used at a later stage to change political directions should the country experience a radical alteration in the balance of power. Ultimately, this ambiguity may cause concern among the EU and its member states, possibly disincentivizing them from granting guarantees to the country and, conversely, expecting greater efforts from it.

⁴⁴ (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Resolution No. 2483-IX 'On Some Measures to Fulfil Ukraine's Obligations in the Field of European Integration'" (2022)).

⁴⁵ (Art. 11, Constitution of Moldova, "Moldova (Republic of) 1994 (Rev. 2016) Constitution - Constitute" (2016), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Moldova_2016).

3.1.2. The Political Internal Structural Factors: Institutional Power-Sharing and Parliamentary Representation as the Catalysts of Legislative Initiative in Matter of European Integration

In the process of accession to the EU, the coordination between the legislative and executive branches is a central feature within the decision-making structure in matter of European integration and alignment with the EU *acquis*. Understandably, if on one hand the Parliament is entrusted with adopting EU-related laws, on the other, the Government is responsible for their implementation and transposition into the national normative system, making their functions and powers interdependent. Among the factors influencing their relationship, the form of government and the involvement of the political opposition in the decision-making process are most relevant.

Ukraine features the case of a semi-presidential form of government, characterized by the share of executive powers between the president and the prime minister, while Moldova showcases a parliamentary system with the Prime Minister detaining full executive powers and reliant on the confidence of the Parliament, “the supreme representative body of the people” (Art. 60 of the Constitution). According to the Ukrainian Constitution, the Verkhovna Rada is “the sole legislative authority” (Art. 75) empowered with “adopting laws” (Art. 85 comma 3) and “determining the principles of domestic and foreign policy, implementing the strategic course of the State to acquire full membership of Ukraine in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization” (Art. 85 comma 5). Moreover, it is entrusted with the appointment of the Prime Minister, the adoption of a decision of no confidence in the Cabinet of Ministers, as well as with the power of exercising control over its activity (Art. 85 comma 12, 13 and Art. 87). The Prime Minister is thus appointed by the Verkhovna Rada upon the submission of the President of Ukraine (Art. 114) and is responsible to both (Art. 113). In terms of powers, it “ensures [...] the implementation of domestic and foreign policy of the State” and “the implementation of the strategic course of the State to acquire full membership of Ukraine in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization” (Art. 116 comma 1). Lastly, as regards the election of the President of Ukraine, this occurs every five years through popular elections (Art. 103). In matter of the country’s path towards the EU, the Constitution states that “the President of Ukraine shall be the guarantor of the implementation of the strategic course of the State to acquire full membership of Ukraine in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation” (Art. 102). Furthermore, he is in charge of representing the State in

international relations and administering the foreign policy activities of the State (Art. 106 comma 3); terminating “the authority of the Verkhovna Rada in cases stipulated by the Constitution” (Art. 106 comma 8) and signing or vetoing laws adopted by the Verkhovna Rada (Art. 106 comma 29, 30).

Pursuant to the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, the Parliament is “the supreme representative body of the people of the Republic of Moldova and the sole legislative authority of the State” (Art. 60) and is vested with the powers to adopt “laws, decisions and motions” (Art. 66a), and to exercise “parliamentary control over executive power in the manners and within the limits provided for by the Constitution” (Art. 66f). In turn, the Government, appointed by the President of the Republic, is subject to the vote of confidence of the Parliament (Art. 98 comma 2). It adopts decisions to ensure the enforcement of laws (Art. 102 comma 2), which must consequently be signed by the Prime Minister and countersigned by the ministers responsible to put them into effect (Art 102 comma 4). The last public authority is the President, the Head of State and “guarantor of national sovereignty, independence, of the unity and territorial integrity of the State” (Art. 77). He/she is elected by the citizens every four years (Art. 78), promulgates laws submitted by the Parliament (Art. 93) and is endowed with certain powers in matters of foreign policy, such as holding official negotiations, concluding international treaties and accrediting diplomatic representatives (Art. 86). However, his/her role is merely ceremonial compared to Ukraine and the Cabinet of Ministers figures as the primary executive authority (Art. 113). This feature of having a head of state elected by the citizens but with a primarily symbolic role underscores the Parliament, the only other popularly elected body, as the pivotal body in Moldovan decision-making, with the Government dependent on it.

Such a preliminary overview, which informs about the role of the public authorities in Ukraine and Moldova, however, overlooks the actual division of powers among the main institutions, especially in the context of European integration. Although for Ukraine the tasks to implement the European strategic course are allocated through the Constitution to the respective institutions, mirroring the country’s irreversible course towards European integration, the Constitution of Moldova addresses just generically the powers of the public authorities, without mentioning their role to attain the European goal. In both cases, it has been fundamental to resort to the specific documents peculiarly adopted to manage the integration process and the alignment of the national legislation to the EU *acquis*: Resolution No. 2483-IX "On some measures to fulfil Ukraine's obligations in the field of European Integration" and Government Decision No. 868 of 14 December 2022 “On the approval of

the Coordination Mechanism of the European Integration Process of the Republic of Moldova”⁴⁶.

As regards Ukraine, the Parliament and the Government work in close cooperation. The right of legislative initiative in the Verkhovna Rada falls to both institutions, as well as the President (Art. 93 Constitution). The legislative proposal is then submitted to the Committees of the Verkhovna Rada responsible for the topic of the drafted legislation. The Committee of Ukraine’s Integration into the European Union is requested to review and prepare the legislation for the alignment with EU law. The procedure requires the perfect coordination of the Parliament with the Cabinet of Ministers, whose main role is that of implementing the legislation and maintaining a database to track the legislative progress. Moreover, it must also take care of the translation of EU legislative acts to be used as a reference in the legislative process. The President, although allowed to initiate draft laws, mainly performs overseeing functions to ensure that the policies adopted align with the EU goals. He also promulgates the laws passed by the Parliament.

On the contrary, in Moldova, the Government has established a multi-tiered coordination mechanism, involving four levels. The first is the highest political level represented by the National Commission for European Integration, responsible for the strategic coordination of the EU integration process. At the second level, the governmental one, there is the Governmental Commission for European Integration, which approves the decisions related to legislative and policy changes needed for integration. The third inter-institutional level is then filled by the Inter-institutional Coordination Group, chaired by the State Secretary for European Integration at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration. It coordinates and ensures the planning at the interinstitutional level of the activity of the sectoral working groups necessary for the management of the process of accession to the European Union and the implementation of the Association Agreement and the Association Agenda. The fourth operational level is characterized by the sectoral working groups, established for each of the 33 negotiation chapters and grouped into six clusters. These groups include experts and officials from various ministries and public bodies. They mainly develop and monitor the implementation of the planning document for achieving the political and economic criteria for membership in the European Union. Overall, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration ensures the coherence of

⁴⁶ (Government of the Republic of Moldova, “Government Decision on the Approval of the Coordination Mechanism of the European Integration Process of the Republic of Moldova,” Pub. L. No. 868 (2022), https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=134494&lang=ro).

the European integration process, working closely with the Ministry of Justice, the State Chancellery and other key institutions. Moreover, ministries, MPs and autonomous public institutions can participate in working groups, ensuring compliance with EU requirements and providing expertise. The State Chancellery's Centre for Harmonization of the Legislation is finally responsible for assessing the conformity of adopted laws with EU legislation (OECD/SIGMA, 2023).

The result of the analysis has shown that Moldova, compared to Ukraine, has designed a much more structured and multi-level system, with multiple levels of coordination and oversight within the Government. Conversely, Ukraine has established a more comprehensive and easier framework, centered on the coordination between the Parliament and the Government. Also, the role of committees, although central to the process of review and preparation of the legislation to align with the EU *acquis*, is different in the case of Moldova compared to Ukraine. In Moldova the committees are included in a broader mechanism of consultation, while in Ukraine they perform within the parliamentary legislative framework following a specific procedure. These key differences justify the hypothesis that Moldova's articulated and unclear coordination mechanism, with overlapping and undefined roles, has contributed to cumbersome decision-making on European integration, slowing the alignment of national legislation with European legislation. However, such a statement does not consider the entire process of decision-making where the parliament and the government cooperates. Given the Government's dependency on Parliament's confidence, it should operate based on the directives provided by the latter. This interdependence is further affected by the presence of a parliamentary majority that supports the government, the functional dynamics of the parliament, and the prerogatives implicitly assumed by the government since the onset of the conflict in February 2022.

In this regard, it is relevant to consider two aspects which in some way interfere in the functioning of the institutions and alter the balance of powers among them, both in the case of Ukraine and Moldova. The first one is given by the context of war, which usually strengthens the powers of the government over those of the parliament, limiting the latter's oversight capabilities over the executive. The second one is related to political consensus within the parliament, which affects relationships between the ruling party and the political opposition.

In Ukraine, the regime of martial law, introduced by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy through presidential decree⁴⁷, has determined the necessary reinforcement of the executive powers in the hands of the President. Ukraine's semi-presidentialism, frequently described in terms of a president-parliamentary model where both the parliament and the president are empowered to dismiss the prime minister, has thus tended to augment the president's prerogatives over the parliament (Sedelius, Mashtaler, and Raunio, 2024). Historically, during war times, the executive has ensured a higher degree of coordination and expertise, making easier to navigate policy implementation and enforcement. However, two paths may occur: either the executive centralizes its governance prerogatives, following a leader-implementer model, or, in accordance with an arbiter-manager model, opts for a system of power-sharing. In the first scenario, the president might decide to concentrate all powers in his hands. Alternatively, a system of distribution of powers with the government authority may need to be designed (Sedelius, Mashtaler, and Raunio, 2024). Based on my analysis, I find that Ukraine has opted for an arbiter-manager model and I will now explain it making reference to the obligations in matter of European integration. Examining the President's speeches from June 2022 to July 2023 has revealed that his commitment to passing legislation to conform with EU law is not proactive but mainly symbolic, targeted primarily to motivate and inform the citizens about the European course of the country⁴⁸. In his remarks, he frequently refers to the hopes of a fast Ukraine's' integration into the EU. For instance, in a speech delivered at the special plenary session of the European Parliament on February 9, 2023, President Zelenskyy emphasized Ukraine's effort to preserve the European way of life, which he declared Russia "attempts to destroy"⁴⁹. Concurrently, reviewing the portal of the Government of Ukraine and its updates, it emerges that the institution plays a significant role in informing about the technical advancements and the policies implemented to align national legislation with that of the EU, as well as in updating the roadmap the government intends to follow to ensure the quick and successful opening of accession

⁴⁷ Decree N° 64/2022 "On the imposition of martial law in Ukraine"

(President of Ukraine – Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "President Signed a Decree on the Imposition of Martial Law in Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada Approved It," Official website of the President of Ukraine, accessed September 4, 2024, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-pidpisav-ukaz-pro-zaprovadzhennya-voyennogo-stanu-73109>).

⁴⁸ (President of Ukraine - Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "Speeches — Official Web Site of the President of Ukraine," Official website of the President of Ukraine, accessed September 4, 2024, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/speeches>).

⁴⁹ (President of Ukraine – Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "Russia Is Trying to Destroy the Ukrainian European Way of Life; We Will Not Allow That - President's Speech at the Special Plenary Session of the European Parliament," Official website of the President of Ukraine, accessed September 4, 2024, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayinskij-yevropejskij-sposib-zhittya-rosiya-namagayetsya-80881>).

negotiations⁵⁰. Acknowledged this and taken into consideration the above-illustrated coordinative framework designed to fulfill EU obligations, it can be concluded that in terms of European integration, the principal actors active on the legislative and policy fronts are the parliament and the government. Their engagement is not merely rhetoric but tangibly targeted at handling the substantive reforms necessary to advance Ukraine's EU accession objectives. While the President plays a fundamental role in setting the European direction of the country and in boosting national support for the reform process, the Parliament and the Government are directly involved in the drafting and execution of laws and reforms to meet EU standards.

Consequently, how the government and parliament interact in the decision-making process to align the country with EU standards depends on the political majority supporting the government and on the internal functioning of the parliament. In Ukraine, the Parliament has proved to be extremely united and cohesive, facilitated by the ban of the "Opposition Platform for Life" party, which consisted of pro-Russian politicians, in March 2022 and their subsequent exit from the Verkhovna Rada ("Adaptation of Parliamentary Practices to Working Conditions during the Full-Scale Aggression of the Russian Federation | Лабораторія Законодавчих Ініціатив", 2023). The absence of a pro-Russian faction in the Parliament has considerably reduced the political polarization in the country, while increasing political consensus and the adoption of laws. Moreover, the deputy faction of the "Servant of the People" party, representing the President, occupies 58.6% of the seats in the parliament, meaning more than half of the total seats, with a total number of 235 members out of 401⁵¹. It results that, although there may be small frictions within the parliament, especially from the opposition party "European Solidarity"⁵², the "Servant of the People" influence is able to dominate the legislative process. This dominance has considerably favored the cohesion in the institution, accelerating the time for obtaining the committee's opinion on the first reading (Agency for Legislative Initiatives, 2023). Specifically, laws

⁵⁰ (Government Portal, "Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine - News," accessed September 4, 2024, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/searchresult>).

⁵¹ The number of members of the "Servant of the People" party, as well as the total number of parliamentary members may have been slightly higher in 2022. Reported data are updated to May 2024, with a lower number of MPs due to death or loss of mandate. According to martial law, elections cannot be held during wartime. "How Parliament Works in Ukraine" (USAID and Internews Ukraine, June 21, 2024), <https://internews.ua/en/rang/materiale/how-parliament-works-in-ukraine>).

⁵² The party, led by the former President Petro Poroshenko, is anti-Russian but has sometimes criticized the government's working. Its critics related in particular to the management of defense procurement, lack of government transparency and handling of economic policies. (POLITICO, "Discussion and Debate Are Democratic Strengths — Even in Time of War," April 28, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-democracy-volodymyr-zelenskyy-discussion-and-debate-even-in-time-of-war/>).

adopted to align with the EU *acquis* have registered the shortest time, underscoring the process of integration with EU law. However, objections have been raised by some experts regarding the quality of the laws adopted. Indeed, while political consensus within the Parliament facilitates the faster adoption of laws in the agenda, it also hampers the control of errors and shortcomings which would emerge from deeper scrutiny. Although this tendency has mainly persisted during the 7th session of the IX convocation of the Verkhovna Rada⁵³, seeing an improvement in the quality of laws and a reduction in the speed of adoption, the functioning and effectiveness of the parliamentary institution despite the war have been exceptional. Moreover, the support for the government by the parliament has allowed the former to initiate a larger percentage of laws⁵⁴ compared to the previous years, easing the subsequent steps of implementation.

To sum up, especially during the first six months of war, the parliament operated in what has been called a “turbo-mode” (Agency for Legislative Initiatives, 2023), accelerating the reform process to the detriment of the legislation’s quality. This approach materialized in the adoption of many laws after just the first reading, especially in the early months of the conflict⁵⁵. Simultaneously, it allowed the government to intervene in the legislative process, allowing ministries to submit draft laws directly to friendly MPs, thus bypassing the lengthy internal consultation process within the government (OECD/SIGMA, 2023). The Parliament has accepted the interruption of the “Question Hours”, its most advanced tool for scrutinizing government activities, opting instead for balanced relations to ensure a swift and clear lawmaking process. Although this peaceful cooperation between the government and the parliament – coupled with the “turbo-mode” – has somehow undermined the quality of the laws adopted, it has expedited law adoption, effectively sustaining the country’s path towards EU accession.

Moving to Moldova, the country extended the state of emergency, launched in October 2021 with the energy crisis, throughout the period under study (until December

⁵³ The IX Convocation initiated on August 29, 2019. The 7th session refers to the first six months of war.

⁵⁴ The Government initiated 19% of laws in the 7th session, compared to 30% in the 8th session (September 2022-August 2023)

(Agency for Legislative Initiatives, “Monitoring of the Work of the Verkhovna Rada of the IX Convocation for the 8th Session” (Kyiv, 2023), www.parliament.org.ua).

⁵⁵ Two-third of the registered laws were adopted in the first reading in the first six months; one-third of the registered laws were adopted in the first reading between September 2022 and February 2023

(Agency for Legislative Initiatives, “How Parliament Worked in the Second Half of the Full-Scale Invasion: Trends and Conclusions”, July 28, 2023, <https://parlament.org.ua/en/analytics/how-parliament-worked-in-the-second-half-of-the-full-scale-invasion-trends-and-conclusions/>).

2023). Under this emergency regime, the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CES) was authorized to issue decisions regarding food supply and the energy sector (Global State of Democracy Initiative, 2024) without adhering to the usual requirements for participation and transparency. Consequently, certain freedoms were restricted, in particular those of expression and assembly, sparking debates about the government's management of security in relation to the respect of democracy (CSOMETER, 2024). The activation of emergency measures thus conferred the government increased autonomy and power, free from regular oversight (Cenusa et al., 2023). However, unlike in Ukraine, the executive power in Moldova is not shared between the government and the presidency, making the president largely symbolic in the overall decision-making process and merely a guarantor of the state's European course, especially when it comes to diplomatic engagements and formal invitations to foreign states' representatives. Therefore, also in the case of Moldova, the analysis of speeches delivered by the President Maia Sandu and the publications on the government website, reveal a more tangible and substantial commitment of the government, compared to the motivational and informational role played by the president.

It is worth pointing out that the government's autonomy has also been facilitated by the presence of a consistent parliamentary majority supporting it, with the Action and Solidarity Party occupying 63 seats out of 101 seats in the Moldovan unicameral parliament. The absence of consultations and transparency has indeed resulted in the adoption of nearly half of the laws (43.9%) sponsored by the government via an urgent procedure (45 out of 455 laws adopted⁵⁶), which bypassed regular assessment procedures and proper public consultations (OECD/SIGMA, 2023). If on one hand the lack of assessment procedures affects the quality of legislation adopted, as has been the case in Ukraine; on the other, the absence of public consultations and transparency from the government side witnesses a lack of coordination in parliamentary and governmental legislative decision-making and planning. Moreover, the fact that in Moldova the Committee for Foreign Affairs and European Integration is not solely engaged in tasks regarding alignment with EU law, complicates the process of integration further by necessitating a more balanced approach among different foreign policy dossiers.

⁵⁶(Secretariatul Parlamentului, "Raport de Activitate al Secretariatului Parlamentului Pentru Anul 2023" (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, January 2024).

In 2022, 68 out of 381 laws adopted were passed using the extraordinary procedure (Secretariatul Parlamentului, "Raport de Activitate al Secretariatului Parlamentului Pentru Anul 2022" (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, February 2023).

Another aspect worth considering in the specific case of Moldova, differentiating the country from Ukraine, is the presence of two opposing parties in the Parliament: the Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists, and the Șor Party. These two left-wing parties, occupying in total 38 seats, have been traditionally aligned with Moscow. Since the outbreak of the war and the ensuing economic and energy crisis, they have started subtle mobilizations of the population. In September 2022 and February 2023, Ilan Șor, the oligarch guiding the Șor Party, organized a series of protests outside the Moldovan parliament, culminating in the resignation of former Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița in February 2023. The main critics raised against the government related to the economic crisis prompted by the new European course, which distanced Moldova from Russia, from which it no longer receives gas (Wesolowsky, 2023). Although Moldova has clearly demonstrated its support for Ukraine, the influence of the opposition and its ambiguous stance *vis-à-vis* Russia and the EU, has undermined the functionality of the Parliament. Indeed, between August 2022 and July 2023, the majority party, the Party of Action and Solidarity, introduced the most draft laws, whereas no draft law was authored or adopted by the opposing MPs (Bucataru et al., 2023). Although this has facilitated the adoption of some laws, it has simultaneously weakened participatory democracy, generating distrust among citizens and eroding the credibility of institutions in the eyes of investors. A similar scenario unraveled within the government, where, at the highest political level of the coordination structure for European integration, the National Commission for European Integration, restricted the participation of the representatives of the opposition groups and the Governor of Gagauzia, the autonomous territorial unit of Moldova⁵⁷ (Cenusa et al., 2023),

Summarizing the key differences between the two countries, in both, the executive's powers and involvement in the decision-making process have increased over the last two years. Although this increase has been accepted in both cases by the legislative body, allowing for the government's intervention in the lawmaking system, the coordination between the two has been different in Moldova and Ukraine. No effective coordination has emerged in Moldova, due to the justified bypass of consultation and transparency by the executive body during the state of emergency. In contrast, in Ukraine, both organs have

⁵⁷ This territory has been the crossroads of several religions and cultures, including Romanian and Russian. Its relationship with the central government in Chisinau has always been ambiguous and its link to Moscow has always been explicit. With Russia, in fact, it is linked not only historically, but also economically. In the context of the conflict with Ukraine, the region is under surveillance by European authorities because of the risk it poses to the country's security. Russia could in fact use it as a way to destabilize the entire country. (Marcin Kosienkowski, "The Russian World as a Legitimation Strategy Outside Russia: The Case of Gagauzia," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62, no. 3 (May 4, 2021): 319–46).

effectively coordinated to make the decision-making process more effective, adapting to the context and the requests submitted by the European Commission in terms of alignment with the EU *acquis*. In particular, the Parliament in Ukraine has managed to ensure unity and cohesion. Conversely, in Moldova, the lack of a committee-based structure and the hindrances created by opposition parties, have negatively affected the linear functioning of the Parliament and the stability of the Government. Besides this, the absence in Moldova of a separate Committee for European Integration has forced MPs to keep a balance in opinion delivery among various foreign policy dossiers, in compliance with the country's codified neutrality in international relations.

3.1.3. The Economic Internal Structural Factor: The Availability of Energy Resources

The energy dependency of a country is another factor I consider important to analyze to understand how the country's need for energy resources and electricity affects its stance towards Russia and the EU, consequently affecting the pace of reforms adoption. Since the beginning of the conflict, the political debate around the energy issue has intensified, especially for countries like Moldova and Ukraine which have historically been tied to Russian exports. In Moldova, this issue has also polarized political factions, with the opposition favoring the maintenance of relations with Russia and the government oriented towards integration into the European Energy Community. Russia has, as many know, been the main exporter of natural gas and oil to Europe⁵⁸. The war has therefore severely impacted the countries that were most dependent on it in terms of resources, damaging their economy and creating discontent among the population, which has faced significant increases in electricity, oil and gas prices. Understanding the availability of resources in Ukraine and Moldova is crucial to comprehend the choice of the two countries in linking up with major European countries that can compensate for the loss due to the blockade of Russian exports, and to better understand the political polarization in Moldova, which I consider to be an important variable in judging its slower path towards Europeanisation.

Starting with Moldova, the country has no notable oil and natural reserves, limiting its domestic energy production to solid biofuels ("Energy Production and Consumption in Eastern Partnership Countries", 2022). As a result, Moldova's domestic production covers

⁵⁸ In 2021, Russian gas supplies corresponded to 32% of EU's demand, while oil supply corresponded to 60% of Russia's oil production. (IEA, "Gas Market and Russian Supply – Russian Supplies to Global Energy Markets – Analysis," accessed September 7, 2024, <https://www.iea.org/reports/russian-supplies-to-global-energy-markets/gas-market-and-russian-supply-2>).

just 24.6% of its energy demand⁵⁹, making the country's energy supply mostly dominated by imports. The principal exporter of natural gas and oil to the country has long been Russia through transit in Ukrainian pipelines, while the main imports of electricity have come from Transnistria and therefore indirectly from Russia. Transnistria, the breakaway region under Russian influence, indeed, receives gas free-of-charge from Russia's gas company "Gazprom" which then sells through the Cuciurgan electricity plant to Moldova, accounting for 70% of the country's electricity supply (Litra, 2023). Russia has consistently used energy as a geopolitical weapon, demanding Moldova pay debts (in 2021 over \$700 million) to Gazprom, as well as imposing higher prices for gas supplies (Litra, 2023). These actions were aimed at undermining the country's European course and encouraging opposition parties like the Șor Party or the Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists to mobilize the population, discontent of the high energy expenses, in favor of greater Russian political and economic support (as happened in September 2022 and February 2023).

Shifting to Ukraine, the country has, in contrast, a consistent domestic production of diversified energy sources. Before the war started, it produced 35% of its energy from nuclear sources, 4% from oil, 28% from natural gas, 9% from renewable sources and 22% from coal, for an overall domestic production representing 66% of the country's gross available energy⁶⁰. Its net import dependency on energy in 2020 was 34%, 40% lower than that of Moldova ("Energy Production and Consumption in Eastern Partnership Countries", 2022). As a result, Ukraine is a major exporter of natural gas (28%), nuclear energy (23%) and coal (26%). Moreover, Ukraine is a well-known exporter of electricity. In 2020, when the export of electricity exceeded the import, the principal destination countries were Hungary (44.4% of total exported electricity), followed by Poland (31.2% total exported electricity) and Romania (18.3% total exported electricity)⁶¹. However, despite Ukraine's domestic production of natural resources, over the years it has also imported from Russia and Belarus, at least until 2020. Since that time, Ukraine has started to gradually distance itself from Russia, advantaged by its self-sufficiency with respect to Moldova.

Building on these considerations, the absence of resource production in Moldova has rendered the country highly reliant on Russia. With the outbreak of the war, Moldova's

⁵⁹ Data for 2020: (Eurostat, "Energy Production and Consumption in Eastern Partnership Countries" (Expertise France/Eurostat, 2022), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>).

⁶⁰ Data for 2020: (Eurostat, "Energy Production and Consumption in Eastern Partnership Countries" (Expertise France/Eurostat, 2022), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>).

⁶¹ (Укренерго, "Експорт електроенергії в 2020 році перевищив імпорту в 2,1 рази," January 13, 2021, <https://ua.energy/zagalni-novyny/eksport-elektroenergiyi-v-2020-rotsi-perevyshhyv-import-v-2-1-razy/>).

susceptibility and dependency on Russian gas became even more apparent. Indeed, the government's decision to cut Russian gas imports and turn to the support of the EU in seeking alternative sources of energy⁶² was used by the opposition to criticize the government, nourishing the existing political polarization in the country. The opposition blamed the administration for the spike in energy prices and the consequent hardships endured by Moldovan citizens during the winter months. As a result, the government's decision to cease reliance on Russian energy has become a contentious issue, further slowing Moldova's path toward Europeanization.

Contrarily, Ukraine's strong domestic production allowed it to compensate for the loss of Russian energy supplies, making the disconnection from Russian gas a necessity to ensure national security. Thus, instead of triggering political polarization, the decision was unanimously supported by all political forces, even those traditionally more skeptical to break away from Russian gas. All political forces also supported the country's transition towards the synchronization of Ukrenergo with the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E) in December 2023 (ENTSO-E, 2023).

To conclude this section, although for both countries the EU's assistance has been fundamental in implementing diversification of gas supplies and severing their reliance on Russian gas, in Moldova the complete move away from Russian gas supplies has shaped its political and geopolitical landscape, impeding the country's pace of integration into the EU.

3.1.4. The Cultural Internal Structural Factor: The Identity of Ukrainians and Moldovans

The last internal structural factor I will analyze is the cultural one. In particular, I intend to assess Ukrainian and Moldovan public opinion regarding their countries' relations with the EU and Russia, and to which of the two value systems they feel a more intense affinity. Public opinion reflects a country's sense of belonging and cultural identity, thereby influencing the consensus on certain political choices. Therefore, assessing public opinion is crucial for understanding the direction in which political actors are driven to proceed and the pace at which they are allowed to steer the country towards a specific policy agenda. Both countries, Ukraine and Moldova, have a historical background of strong influence, first

⁶² For 2023 winter Moldova was aided by reverse gas flows from the Trans-Balkan corridor and from Slovakia, as well as by electricity supply coming from Transnistria. Through the "Energy Community Rescue" the European Commission supported Moldova to counter high energy prices. (European Commission, "EU Reaffirms Close Energy Cooperation with Moldova at High-Level Energy Dialogue in Vienna," December 15, 2022, https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-reaffirms-close-energy-cooperation-moldova-high-level-energy-dialogue-vienna-2022-12-15_en).

from the Soviet Union and then from Russia. At the same time, however, one must consider the conflict factor and the previous instabilities that arose between Russia and the two respective states. Although this leads to a change on the political and economic front, it does not necessarily provoke a radical shift in the cultural identities of the two nations. Analyzing this factor can thus be important to understand which of the two ‘worlds’ Ukraine and Moldova most identify with, consequently influencing the countries’ (geo)political direction. My investigation will be based on surveys conducted both in Moldova and Ukraine by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in the period between June 2022 and October 2023⁶³, supplemented by the work of scholars specializing in nationalism and nation-building studies.

As has already emerged from the analysis of the political and institutional landscape of both Ukraine and Moldova, the two countries, while sharing a similar historical and cultural background from the years under the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, have differed considerably in the evolution of their national identities. Moldova is often characterized by an identity crisis, divided between aligning with Russia or the EU. Gaguzia and Transnistria, respectively the autonomous territorial unit and breakaway region within the recognized borders of Moldova, have consistently maintained strong ties with Russia, fueling pro-Russian sentiment among their populations. In contrast, the rest of the country is polarized between Russian and Romanian-European culture. Considering its geographical, cultural and linguistic similarities with Romania, Moldova has also gravitated towards a pro-EU identity, further contributing to the country’s cultural division. Conversely, Ukraine has built its national identity with an awareness of its differences from Russia’s historical and political narratives, especially after the 2014 Maidan Revolution (Rutland, 2023). This has manifested in a stark resistance to any Russia’s imperialist claims.

This social identification is evident in the surveys conducted by IRI. In Moldova, 66% of the population favors the country’s accession in the EU, as the graph below demonstrates:

⁶³ The International Republican Institute is an NGO active in more than 100 countries and established in 1983 with the aim of strengthening political parties, civil society and democratic governance worldwide.

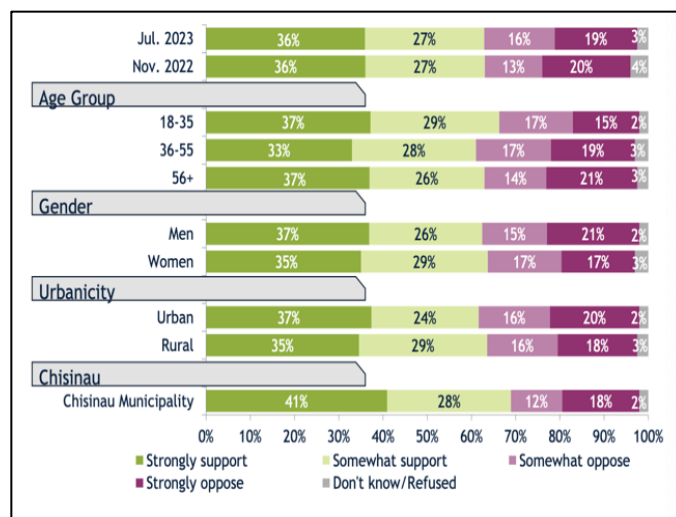


Figure 2: "Moldova becoming an EU member" (Centre for Insight in Survey Research, "National Survey of Moldova" (International Republican Institute, November 9, 2023)

However, the economic and political ties with Russia are difficult to eradicate, demonstrating the country's polarized society. In 2022, the percentage of people considering Russia as the most important economic partner was equal to the percentage of those considering the EU the most reliable economic partner (67%). By 2023, Russia was replaced by Romania as the second most favorable economic partner for Moldovans, although Ukraine still ranked below the former.

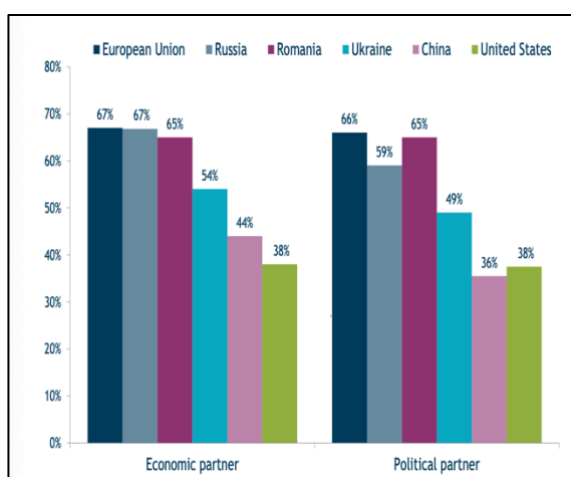


Figure 4: "Most important economic partner" (Centre for Insight in Survey Research, "National Survey of Moldova" (International Republican Institute, September 12, 2022)

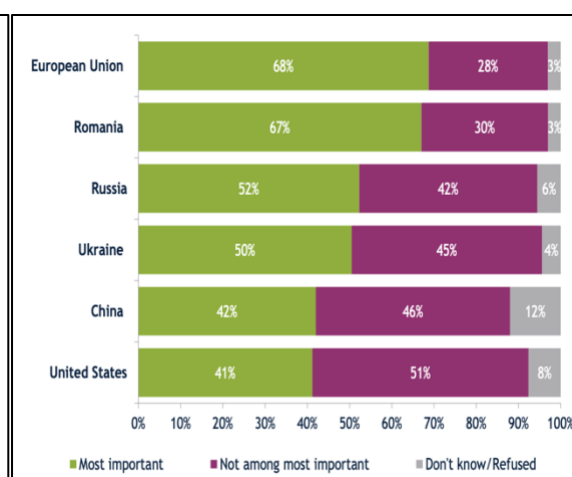


Figure 3: "Most important economic partner" (Centre for Insight in Survey Research, "National Survey of Moldova" (International Republican Institute, November 9, 2023)

It is interesting to note that Russia is also considered an important political partner for Moldova. In 2022, the share of those assessing Russia the most important political partner

was 59%, compared to 66% and 65% who favored the EU and Romania. By 2023, the support for Russia has dropped to 46%, while the support for the EU has increased to 67%.

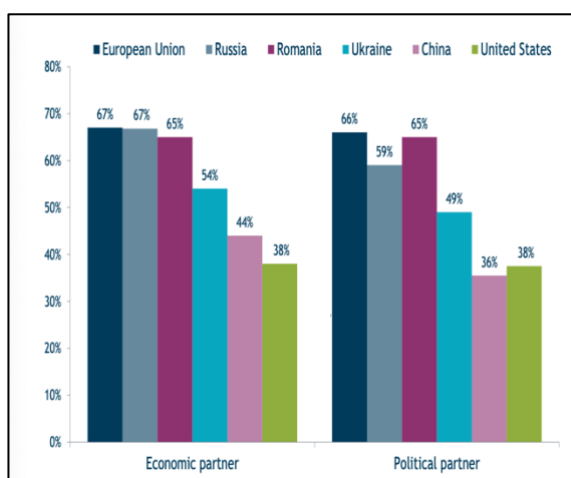


Figure 6: “Most important political partner” (Centre for Insight in Survey Research, “National Survey of Moldova” (International Republican Institute, September 12, 2022)

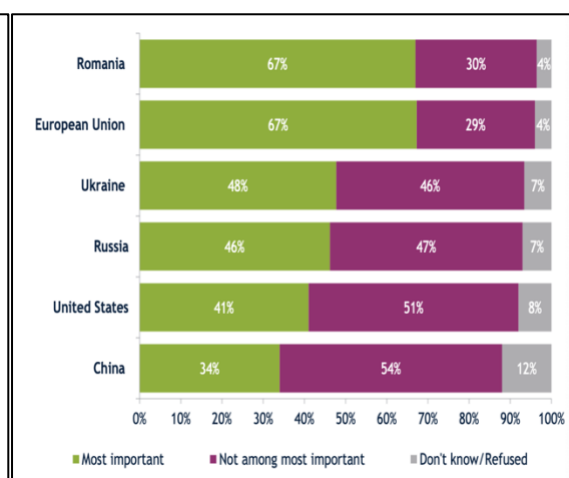


Figure 5: “Most important political partner” (Centre for Insight in Survey Research, “National Survey of Moldova” (International Republican Institute, November 9, 2023)

When asked to the interviewed if they favor the integration of Moldova into the EU, 59.2% indicated they do (Institute for European Policies and Reforms, 2023). However, despite this majority, a significant number also opposes to the country’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth of Independent States. As the graph below depicts, the sum of those that rather disagree or totally disagree is 49.3% (higher than those that rather agree or totally agree – 34.9%).

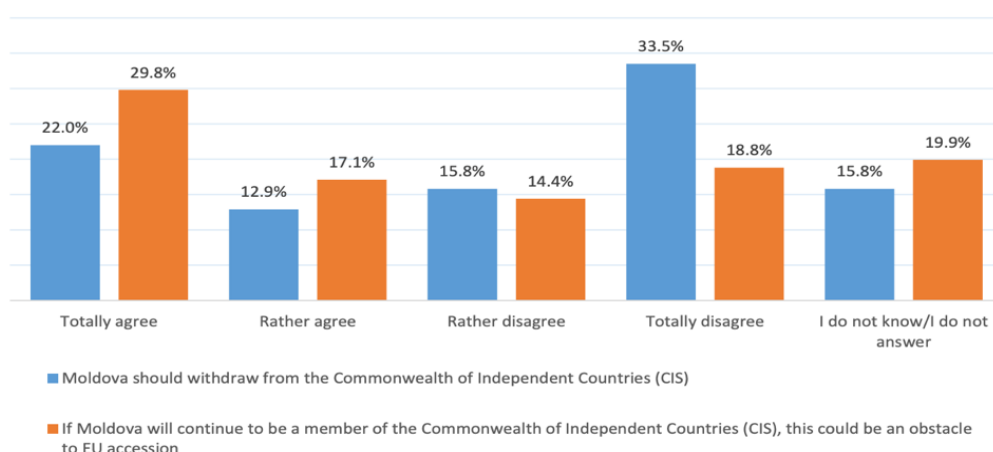


Figure 7: “Moldovan’s opinion on the withdrawal from the CIS” (Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE), “Public Opinion Survey ‘Perception of the Citizens Regarding Moldova’s European Integration Process’” (Chisinau, November 7, 2023).

As regards Ukraine, the country has demonstrated an extraordinary increase in the percentage of those identifying with the European identity, especially if considered the period 2005-2023. This spans the period before the Orange Revolution and extends after the start of Russian aggression. The increase has been from 36% in 2005 to 51% in 2023 (Razumkov Centre, 2023), with an evident discrepancy between western, traditionally pro-European and eastern regions, traditionally pro-Russian. Culturally, 81% of the citizens identify mostly with Ukrainian traditions, while 10% feel connected to the pan-European culture. Only 0.5% identify with the Russian cultural tradition. Over the years, the myth of Russians and Ukrainians as “fraternal nations” has largely demolished, with 83% of Ukrainians now associating Russia with devolution and backwardness. On the contrary, the EU is associated with progress and development by 84.4% of the interviewed.

You mainly associate the European Union with:

	December 2017	May 2023
Progress and development	76.3	84.4
Backwardness and devolution	3.7	3.1
Hard to say	20.0	12.5

You mainly associate Russia with:

	December 2017	May 2023
Progress and development	16.2	3.1
Backwardness and devolution	50.6	83.1
Hard to say	33.2	13.7

*Figure 8: "What Ukrainians associate the EU and Russia with"
"Identity of Ukrainian Citizens: Trends of Change (May, 2023)" (Razumkov Centre, August 24, 2023)*

With which cultural tradition do you associate yourself, in the first place?

	May 2006	October 2008	December 2013	March 2015	December 2015	December 2017	June 2021	May 2023
West European	6.6	4.2	7.5	10.0	7.1	13.1	9.8	10.3
Soviet	16.4	17.3	12.5	13.8	10.3	9.9	9.8	3.6
Ukrainian	56.3	58.1	67.7	65.5	70.0	68.9	72.9	80.8
Russian	11.3	15.5	6.2	4.2	3.2	2.0	3.3	0.5
Other	1.5	1.4	1.7	2.2	1.7	0.9	0.8	1.7
Hard to say	7.9	3.5	4.4	4.2	7.7	5.1	3.4	3.1

Figure 9: "What cultural tradition do Ukrainians identify with"
"Identity of Ukrainian Citizens: Trends of Change (May, 2023)" (Razumkov Centre, August 24, 2023)

Generically, Ukrainians consider themselves as European, especially from an historical, social and geographical perspective (Razumkov Centre, 2023). In addition, more than 80% agree with the country's accession to the EU ("National survey of Ukraine", 2023).

As the surveys analyzed have demonstrated, although Moldova favors joining the EU, and its connection with Romania makes it feel even more part of the European "family", the importance of Russia to the country's economy is also recognized by the citizens. This could be the reason why more than 60% oppose the country joining NATO (Institute for European Policies and Reforms, 2023) and almost 60% oppose the international regime of sanctions against Russia because of the war against Ukraine. It must be highlighted that the citizens, especially in the regions of Gaguzia and Transnistria, are significantly influenced by Russian media, despite the government efforts to ban Russian news broadcasts (Solik and Graf, 2023). According to this information, we can expect that public opinion may influence Moldovan MPs in the process of reforms to align with the EU, potentially hindering the country's path towards the EU.

3.2. The Impact of EU's Foreign Direct Investments as External Structural Factor

Foreign Direct Investments are essential tools frequently used by the EU to stimulate economic growth in third countries. Unlike remittances, which provide immediate financial support, FDIs are intended with a long-term perspective. Their objective is to address

economic and developmental gaps by boosting productivity and introducing technology, infrastructure, and capitals. This engagement generates two main interrelated results in the recipient countries: firstly, they enhance economic modernization through their influence on the business environment and infrastructure; secondly, they compel the recipient countries to accelerate the reform process to align with EU norms and standards (Comes et al., 2018).

In this section, I will therefore explore the investments made by the EU and EU member states in Moldova and Ukraine. I will work under the assumption that no country offers anything without expectation, thus theorizing that where investments are more substantial, Europeanization progresses more quickly. This consideration is supported by another: greater investments also increase opportunities for the recipient country to engage with foreign partners through bilateral meetings and events, hence enhancing structural connectedness. This could be crucial for the country to gain insights into needed changes, drawing on the experiences of others.

To compare FDIs in Moldova and Ukraine the foreign direct investment net is sufficient to show the general flow from 2008 to 2023, considering that FDIs outflows are very low and not really impactful on the net FDI trend. Net FDI describes the net inflows of investments from a foreign entity willing to obtain a long-term interest in an enterprise that operates in an economy other than the investor's⁶⁴. The graphs below clearly illustrate that the net FDI, and consequently the FDIs net inflows, have been higher for Ukraine than for Moldova. Ukraine has received billions of dollars in investments, while Moldova has received millions of dollars. Overall, between 2021 and 2022, Ukraine received over 8 billion dollars in FDIs, compared to around 1 billion dollars for Moldova.

⁶⁴ This is a definition of "Foreign direct investment, net (BoP, current US\$)". (Retrieved from International Monetary Fund, Balance of Payments Statistics Yearbook and data files).

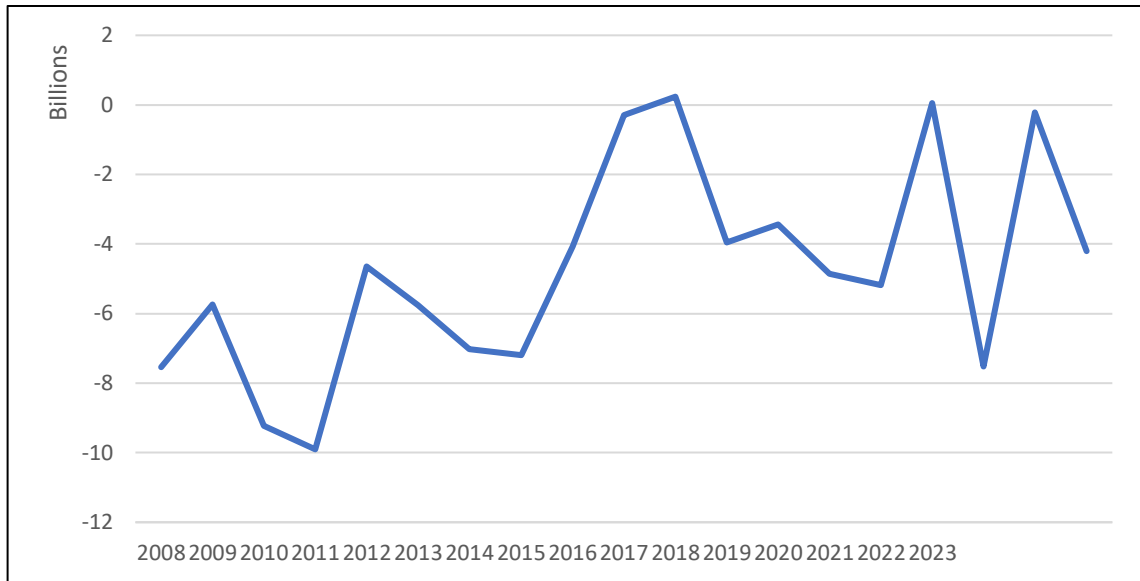


Figure 10: Foreign Direct Investment net of Ukraine (Data source: World Bank (2024) – Foreign direct investment, net (BoP, current US\$) – Ukraine

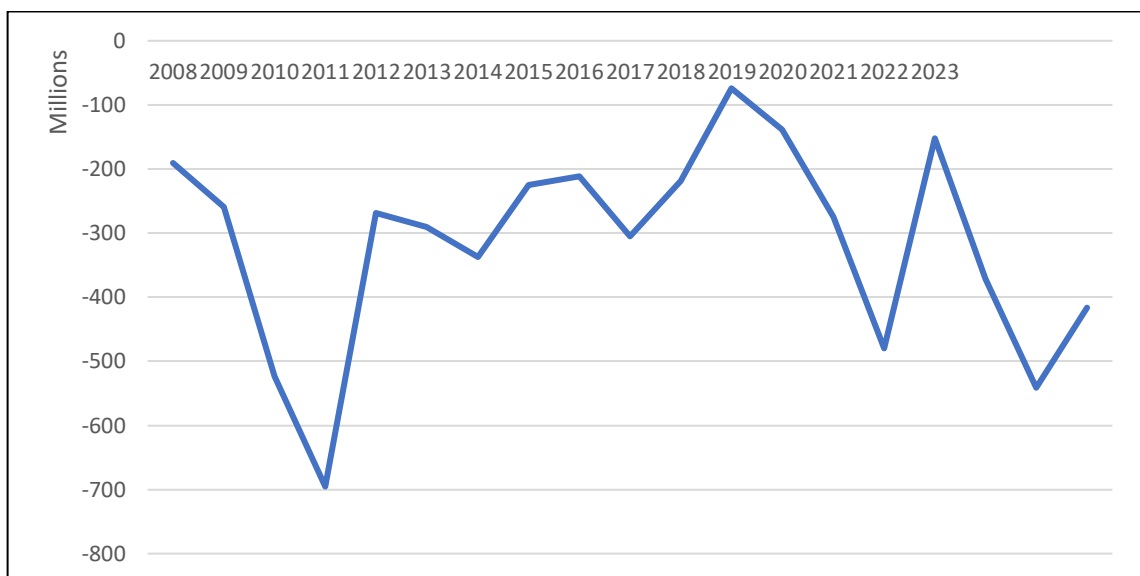


Figure 11: Foreign Direct Investment net of Moldova (Data source: World Bank (2024) – Foreign direct investment, net (BoP, current US\$) – Moldova

However, since this data does not reflect the precise sum of FDIs received exclusively from the single European countries – critical for the purpose of my thesis – I will now present the results from the International Monetary Fund’s Coordinated Direct Investment Survey (CDIS), which details the direct investments from major partners. In the case of Moldova, Figure 12 shows the countries from which Moldova received the greatest amount of investments. At the top is Cyprus with 784 million dollars invested in the country in 2022, followed by Russia with 715 million dollars, Romania with 429 million dollars, and the Netherlands and Germany with respectively 413 and 247 million dollars.



Figure 12: Top Five Sources of Investments in Moldova (Retrieved from International Monetary Fund, "Coordinated Direct Investment Survey (CDIS)," 2024).

For Ukraine, Figure 13 shows a similar, although different scenario. First of all, Russia is not contemplated among the main investors, which is something understandable considering the ongoing war. Secondly, investments in Ukraine are more consistent than in Moldova. In 2022, considering also the fall of investments due to the outbreak of the war, Cyprus invested in Ukraine more than 16 billion dollars; the Netherlands almost 10 billion dollars; Switzerland 2 billion 620 million dollars; Germany 2 billion 534 million dollars and finally the United Kingdom 2 billion 464 million dollars.

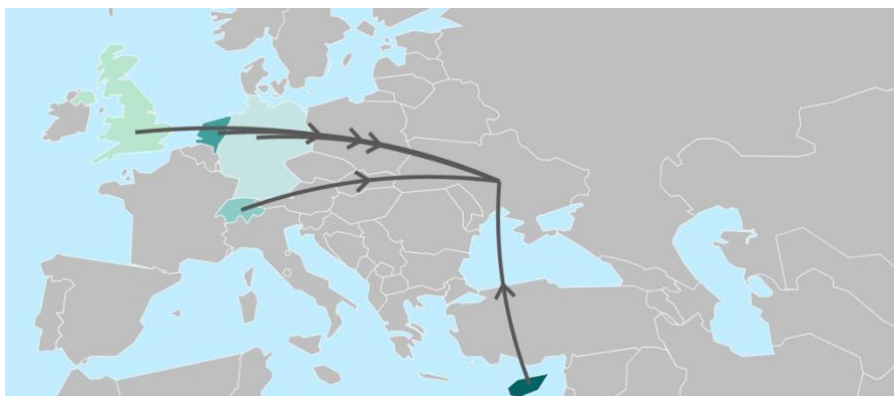


Figure 13: Top Five Sources of Investments in Ukraine (Retrieved from International Monetary Fund, "Coordinated Direct Investment Survey (CDIS)," 2024).

Although Moldova withdrew from the CIS in 2023, its attractiveness, compared to Ukraine, is at a disadvantage. Indeed, its reliance on Eurasian markets creates persistent economic vulnerabilities in the country. Other aspects include the need of diversification of production, political instability, and geopolitical divisions regarding Transnistria (Piroșcă, Stanef-Puică, and Moroianu, 2024). Lastly, one advantage Ukraine has is its advanced public procurement

system. The ProZorro Platform, the hybrid electronic government e-procurement system, has received several awards, becoming a model for other states on how to reform their systems. It unifies all procurement stages into a single framework, reducing costs, simplifying monitoring, and increasing accessibility for SMEs. Its innovative and collaborative approach has earned the trust among stakeholders, including businesses, civil society and government agencies⁶⁵.

3.3. The Impact of The Presidents' Leadership Capacity as Internal Actor-Centered Factor

The leadership capacity of power authorities is another important element in exploring the process of Europeanization and the process of country's alignment with the EU principles. Indeed, this alignment is often the result of the national leaders' ability to steer these processes in the right direction. Notably, a charismatic leader who communicates effectively and resonates emotionally with both foreign partners and citizens, tends to garner greater consensus and deeper integration within the EU's structures. Hence, assessing the impact of the personalities of Maia Sandu and Volodymyr Zelenskyy on their countries' EU integration is important for my research. Albeit both Presidents hold pro-European position, the central attention here is not to discern their policy choices but to scrutinize how their personalities impact both domestic and international consensus. Methodologically, the examination will encapsulate research political psychology's experts, articles, and surveys aimed at measuring support for these leaders.

Starting from President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, he clearly represents a singular and peculiar case. He is not just the "pro-European leader", but also the "hero" of his nation, the courageous defender of the country's sovereignty and independence in the face of a brutal aggression. Since the beginning he has built its strategy around symbolism, generating an emotional force able to impress Western governments (Cliffe, 2022), ready to open their doors to Ukrainian citizens and to Ukraine's membership in the EU's family. Despite the war caused by Russia, the President has always refrained from speaking about hatred. This demonstrated Ukrainians' values of peace and democracy over Russia's authoritarianism, thus contributing to convincing Western countries of the similarities of the country's identity with the European one. His refusal to surrender before the enemy highlighted his responsibility toward his citizens, which helped increase his popular support. Moreover,

⁶⁵ If interested in learning more about how ProZorro works, access this link <https://prozorro.gov.ua/en>. (Moldova uses another platform called MTender)

Zelenskyy's strategic use of media, undeniably aided by the wartime context, is one of his most insightful achievements (Spector, 2023). This remains crucial in getting attention from foreign countries. As argued in the next section, external support from foreign citizens and institutions can significantly accelerate European reforms in the countries concerned, eased by established connections and information exchanges. An indirect assessment of the leadership style and personality of President Zelenskyy, carried out by an American psychologist Theodore Millon⁶⁶, revealed his ambitious and outgoing personality – traits which are typical of a charismatic political leader – and dauntless, which also suggests bravery. These characteristics contribute to portray him as self-confident, unbound by routine and tradition, and as an attention-getter.

For Moldova, President Maia Sandu is the pro-European leader *par excellence*. Although other politicians before her engaged in strengthening relations with the EU and promised European integration, none were able to effectively counter corruption and state capture. Aware of these hurdles, she embodies credibility and a firm commitment to the European project. Not just in the eyes of Moldovan citizens, but also in those of European political leaders. In an interview she clearly stated her hope that European leaders can perceive the genuineness of the administration's efforts in promoting European reforms, indicating her commitment to stability and to reinforce institutions to resist corruption (Bloj, 2023). Moreover, she represents a strong leader, capable of contemporarily managing multiple crises: the refugee crisis, the economic and the energy crisis. Navigating these crises without bending to Russia's will. Lastly, Maia Sandu embodies the leader of reunification, actively working for the peaceful resolution of the conflict with the Transnistrian region (Bloj, 2023). She declared: "[...] I will be a president of European integration that will bring people out of isolation and I will promote a foreign policy that will build bridges, not walls. We will soon start the fight for the transformation of our country [...] I want the Republic of Moldova to be a European state and to have pragmatic relations with the other partners" (Cimpoeșu, 2023). Her words indicate her dedication to her goals and reassure the EU of her reliability. However, despite her non-negotiable break with Russian gas supply and with the customary tradition of visits to Moscow, her ability to silence the pro-Russian opposition is put at test. The continuous attempts to destabilize the country from the Russian part, the

⁶⁶ Data about Zelenskyy were gathered from biographical sources and media. They were then synthesized into a profile of personality using the Milton Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC). (Elise Vomacka and Aubrey Immelman, "The Personality Profile and Leadership Style of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy," *Psychology Faculty Publications*, July 1, 2023, https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/psychology_pubs/143).

protests instigated by Ilan Shor have been a clear sign of the incredible perseverance and determination of the leader. The international prestige she enjoys and the close relationships she has formed with neighbors Ukraine and Romania has enabled the country to not give up and continue toward its chosen path: that of European integration (Cimpoeșu, 2023). Compared to the previous presidency under Igor Dodon, who just had twelve visits to Western countries (including the UK) between 2017 and 2020, in comparison to the twenty-four visits to Russia, Maia Sandu's agenda was busy of visits to European countries (only in 2022 she had thirteen working visits to European countries and several multilateral fora with US and other western nations)⁶⁷. This proves the determination of the leader to demonstrate the country's commitment to European membership and the commitment to consolidate the relations with European member states.

Coming to an overall comparison between Zelenskyy and Sandu's personality styles, a key difference is evident in the frequency of their appearances in the international media. As a matter of fact, Zelenskyy's daily appearance on international news, increases Ukraine's visibility and contributes to his popularity. On the contrary, President Maia Sandu, although embodying different leadership qualities than her predecessor, faces serious obstacles that impact the efficacy of her political activities. It derives that, although Moldova is progressing towards European integration, the results of Europeanization are not positive. The country remains profoundly polarized, impacting also the support for President Sandu. For instance, if Moldovan citizens are questioned about their preferences for the next presidential elections, only 24.4% express support for Sandu. This division highlights the difficult political landscape in which she operates and the challenges she faces in achieving larger consensus.

⁶⁷ The list of the international trips of the former President Igor Dodon and the current President Maia Sandu have been collected by the official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Moldova (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, "Press Releases — Press Service," 2013, <https://presedinte.md/eng/comunicate-de-presa/2020>).

If elections for the President of the Republic of Moldova were to be organized next Sunday, which of the following politicians would you vote for?
Perioada: 08.2023

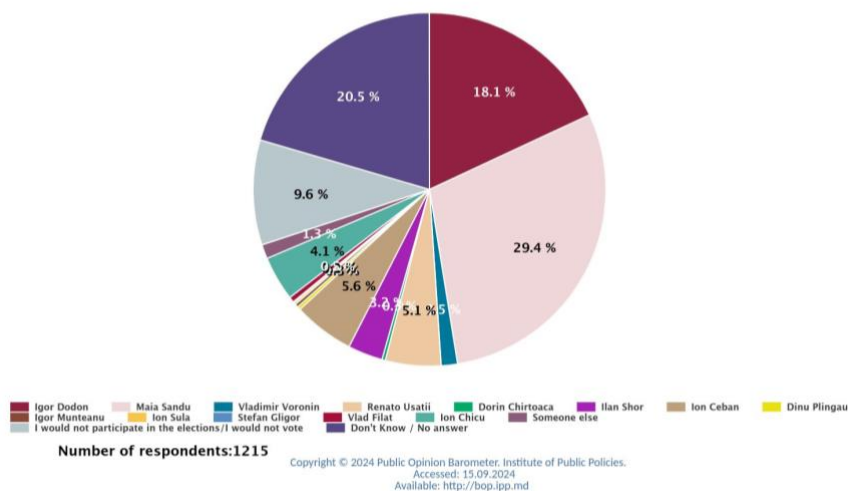


Figure 14: If election for the President of the Republic of Moldova were to be organized next Sunday, which of the following politicians would you vote for?
(Retrieved from Institute for Public Policy, "Public Opinion Barometer | Politics," August 2023).

3.4. The Impact of EU Public Opinion as External Actor-Centered Factor

After discussing the influence that leadership personalities have on the path of European integration, due to their capacity of gaining consensus within and outside national borders, this section will move the focus on the external perception of both Moldova and Ukraine by EU countries. Evaluating this factor is fundamental to understanding whether the sentiments of European citizens toward Moldova and Ukraine play a decisive role in constructing perceptions that Ukraine is further along than Moldova in its integration path. Specifically, it can be assumed that stronger public support from the side of European citizens may encourage the two candidate states to feel more involved, thus inviting them to make greater efforts to reciprocate this support. Conversely, in case such support is lacking, citizens of those states might feel disadvantaged in their reform efforts to integrate into the EU, with consequences that may backfire on the Union itself in later years. In addition, public opinion within EU countries can either facilitate or hamper the integration of Ukraine and Moldova, influencing how they are perceived by policymakers. Indeed, if a country is not well-seen by European citizens, decision-makers may be biased by this sentiment, contributing to a negative image of the country's progress. Ultimately, this can create wrong perceptions of the country's advancement in the reforms to align with the EU *acquis*.

When comparing the general support of EU citizens for Ukraine's and Moldova's EU membership, 33% of EU citizens support Ukraine's accession, compared to 30% for Moldova. However, when examining the single EU countries, the discrepancy between the

support for Moldova and Ukraine becomes more evident. In Denmark, for instance, support for Ukraine's EU membership stands at 50%, compared to 25% for Moldova; in Germany the percentages are 37% for Ukraine and 25% for Moldova; in France 29% support Ukraine in comparison to 15% for Moldova; and in Poland, 47% favor the accession of Ukraine, compared to 36% for Moldova. The only country where the support for Moldova exceeds that for Ukraine is Romania (55% compared to 32%). Indeed, Romania is Moldova's traditional economic and political partner. In Austria the support is nearly the same, 28% for Ukraine and 25% for Moldova, although the country emphasized more the support to the accession of Western Balkan countries⁶⁸.

The results of the surveys show greater support for Ukraine, particularly from new member states or those geographically closer to Ukraine, as well as from member states that hold significant power within the EU decision-making system. The intensified media coverage, depicting Ukraine as audaciously defending its European ambitions, likely heightens EU citizens' perception that Ukraine deserves a seat within the EU. Moldova, by contrast, garners less global attention.

Conclusion

This third chapter has comprehensively explored the factors contributing to Moldova's and Ukraine's Europeanization processes. Employing a dual approach – structural and actor-centered – the chapter has analyzed both domestic and external influences to understand what drives Ukraine's accelerated integration.

To accomplish that, the first section of the chapter examined the constitutional, political, economic and cultural frameworks, thus exploring the impact of these internal structures. Consequently, it investigated how the economic presence of EU member states in Ukraine and Moldova, through foreign direct investments, affects the process.

On the actor-centered front, the second section delved into the personalities of the two leaders – President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and President Maia Sandu – to assess the impact that their leadership capacities may have in garnering economic and political support from the EU and its members. In addition, the last section surveyed how European citizens perceive Ukraine and Moldova, further highlighting external opinions on these nations'

⁶⁸ (ECFR, "New Poll: Europeans Open to Ukraine Joining the EU despite Security Risks, but Cool on Further Enlargement of the Bloc Ahead of Crucial European Council Summit," December 4, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/europeans-open-to-ukraine-joining-the-eu-despite-security-risks/>).

membership. It presupposes that greater support from EU citizens could boost the motivation of these countries to quicker adopt EU-recommended reforms.

In summary the chapter has demonstrated that, although Moldova and Ukraine are progressing towards European integration, the process is complex, involving different levels of influence from both their internal systems and EU external pressures. These processes will be further delineated in the overall conclusion of my thesis, where the main findings concerning the factors affecting their European course will be synthesized more thoroughly.

CONCLUSIONS

Having reached the final part of my thesis, I would now like to focus on the results obtained through the analysis conducted. My thesis, as previously announced, addressed two research questions. The first, discussed in the first chapter, confirmed my hypothesis that Ukraine is further along in its Europeanization process than Moldova. Although my study primarily covered the period 2022-2023, specifically the first year since Ukraine and Moldova were designated as candidate countries for EU membership in June 2022, I found that the conclusions drawn from my research question pertain to a much broader time spectrum, beginning before June 2022. This confirmed the hypothesis that inspired the origin of my work, which posits that the new wave of European enlargement in 2022 contributed to place Moldova and Ukraine on the same level in terms of European integration, despite the two countries being Europeanized at different speeds. Therefore, the first chapter aimed to elucidate this hypothesis by discussing the European Union's decision to expand, incorporating both countries due to concerns about internal security, and it also detailed the evolution of the two countries in the Europeanization process during their first year as candidate countries.

The study found that, despite the progress made by Moldova in the first year of candidacy, Ukraine has advanced further, especially in areas as public administration reforms, the implementation of anti-oligarchy laws, the inclusion of civil society in the decision-making process, and the combat against gender and ethnic discrimination. However, a limitation of this finding is that, due to the EU not imposing a reference model, a linear comparison between the two countries was only possible by looking at their responses to the European Commission's recommendations and the policies they implemented as of June/July 2023. As it does not provide an effective method to investigate the countries' progress, because does not take into account the policies implemented earlier, Schimmelfennig's theory of good governance was proposed as viable framework to reach a balanced conclusion (Schimmelfennig, 2016). This theory posits that Ukraine is further along with the process of Europeanization, due to its better management of public administration, political and European integration policies. The underlying idea is that better governance capacity facilitates the transposition of new norms into the regulatory system, thereby promoting deeper integration into the normative framework of the EU.

Although the theory and the literature related to it have provided a valid foundation to my hypothesis, effectively answering to the first research question, it has been considered too simplistic for analyzing a country's integration, which entails more than mere policy

implementation. Because of this, the second and the third chapters have addressed this issue. The second chapter delineated the theoretical framework for studying the domestic and external factors affecting Europeanization, also explaining the two methodologies supporting the analysis, structural and actor-centered. It has also clarified the reasons behind the selection of the specific factors for examination and dedicated space to explaining how the EU impacts Europeanization through the tools it employs, as well as its normative appeal.

After creating the skeleton of my analysis, the third chapter was dedicated to the empirical investigation of each factor. In summary, the study demonstrated that the Europeanization process is the result of multiple interconnected factors. Among these, it is not possible to discern those that contribute positively or negatively, but rather to consider which of them may have more or less impact on good governance and generally on the process itself. The analysis started with the constitutional factor, which, although it might be considered irrelevant, it actually reveals much about the nature of a state, its political direction and foreign policy. The fact that Moldova has not yet enshrined the principle of *irreversibility* of EU membership in its most authoritative text, as Ukraine did in 2019, it is the first hint of the country's difficulty in distancing itself from its historical Russian legacy and overcoming its longstanding foreign policy neutrality. This feature has proved to be a strong determinant of Moldova's compromised political landscape, consequently hampering its Europeanization process. Indeed, the latter demonstrated to be still highly polarized, with pro-Russian parties, banned in Ukraine, still holding considerable power, able to slow the legislative process in decision-making. Despite the enhanced role of the executive, as happened in Ukraine due to the wartime, Moldova lacked effective coordination between the executive and legislative branches, hampered by the cohesion and unity characterizing Ukraine's Parliament. In terms of EU-related policies, the absence of a separate Committee within the Parliament of Moldova has undermined the rapid transposition of norms. The thesis linked this aspect to the country's declaration of neutrality within the Constitution. Another aspect considered among the domestic structural factors was that of resources' availability, justifying the persistent reliance of a country on gas and oil exporters, primarily Russia. According to data from official sources, Moldova is not self-sufficient in terms of natural resources, placing the country in a position of continued reliance on imports, and thus on Russia. The thesis holds that this aspect further affects the country's geopolitical dynamics and thus its pace of EU *acquis* implementation. Simultaneously, the cultural affiliation of both countries with the EU was examined. The study revealed that this aspect fundamentally underpins the entire discourse on Europeanization. Indeed, where public

consensus on European integration is low, the main representative body (the parliament) would be affected, thus slowing down its legislative activity regarding the adoption of EU-related laws. Holding this aspect also as a proof of the EU's normative power, the section concluded by considering that the latter had a more significant impact in Ukraine compared to Moldova, due to the country's stronger alignment with EU values.

As regards the external impact of the EU, through the structural methodology I could assess the influence of the EU's conditionality mechanisms, which I anchored to the economic presence of the Union and its member countries in both Moldova and Ukraine. According to primary sources of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, it is evident that the direct investments made in Ukraine, including those for the country's post-war reconstruction, are higher than those in Moldova. The lesser impact of conditionality through financial injection in Moldova, compared to Ukraine, may be deemed responsible for Moldova's slower pace of Europeanization, considering its lower incentive to implement reforms. However, the effectiveness of this factor is relatively more difficult to demonstrate, considering the countries' differing GDPs, which consequently dictate their domestic financial needs.

For the last two factors analyzed, related to the impact of the leadership capacities of Maia Sandu and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as well as the role played by the perception of EU citizens regarding both countries' accession to the EU, drawing clear conclusions about their impact on the Europeanization process is quite challenging. Indeed, although one might assume that President Zelenskyy is more suitable to steer the country towards a specific European direction, due to his greater media presence compared to Maia Sandu, the study showed that Sandu also possesses a leadership style and capacities that can equally drive the country towards a specific European path. Therefore, the differences primarily derive from Moldova's polarized political environment and the lack of complete European consensus, which pose impediments to the President in leading the country smoothly towards the desired direction. Lastly, the impact of the cultural perception of EU countries and their citizens on the pace of Europeanization in both Moldova and Ukraine was considered significant. My hypothesis was that a generally higher acceptance of Ukraine's integration compared to Moldova in EU countries might bias my conclusions. Essentially, this section demonstrated that the acceptance of Ukraine's integration is higher than that of Moldova's, especially in Germany and Denmark (ECFR, 2023). However, upon considering the other structural factors analyzed, it became apparent that Ukraine's faster Europeanization is not merely

assumed or perceived but is based on verifiable factors. The latter factor, while relevant, proved not to be particularly effective.

To conclude, the examination of each factor demonstrated that it is nearly impossible to quantify the extent to which each one influences the process. However, by borrowing once again Schimmelfennig's concept of good governance as a parameter to explain *when* and *why* a country is more "Europeanized", it is possible to assert that a balanced separation of power between the executive and legislative branches, and their better coordination in decision-making, may have significantly contributed to more effective performance in terms of European integration. In the background, all other factors examined have equally influenced the process, most notably Russia's influence in Moldova's political landscape, which contributes to increased polarization and economic uncertainty in the country, as well its divided cultural identity. The EU's external impact through financial support and its normative appeal, have also inevitably impacted the overall process. However, since there is no single model on which candidate states can rely as a reference, the way countries respond to the EU highly depends on their internal structures, confirming their centrality in the process. As a result, should the EU increase its financial and economic presence in both countries, I am not sure whether this could significantly affect the countries' progress in European integration, which, I reiterate, is highly dependent on their internal dynamics.

Although this aspect has posed an obstacle to my study, as it could not rely on any reference point for a balanced examination, it also provided me the opportunity to delve into such an intricate process. My hope is that it can inspire other comparative studies on Europeanization, which are currently lacking in the literature, and also motivate scholars to develop new theories to underpin comparison. Moreover, considering the potential implications of the simultaneous advancement of Moldova and Ukraine, despite Moldova's slower progress in Europeanization, suggests that the EU might continue negotiations, including a country which is not fully stable, culturally and politically, thereby bringing major Russian influence in the continent. The two contrasting outcomes it may generate – on one hand enhancing Russia's influence, on the other strengthening security in the continent – constitute the main debate on the EU's eastward enlargement among policymakers throughout Europe.

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