

Svetlana CEBOTARI<sup>1</sup>  
Moldova  
Vakhtang MAISAIA<sup>2</sup>  
Georgia  
Victoria BEVZIUC<sup>3</sup>  
Moldova

## MOLDO-EUROPEAN AND GEORGIAN-EUROPEAN RELATIONS IN THE PROCESS OF THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

**Abstract:** *The annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, as well as the events in the region, resulting in the military aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine on 24th February 2022, accelerated the dynamics of relations between the Republic of Moldova and Georgia with the European Union. Currently, Moldovan-European and Georgian-European relations are conditioned by the events in Ukraine, which have oriented the foreign policy vector of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia versus the EU. The submission of the application for EU accession by Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, as well as Moldova's obtaining the status of a candidate country for EU integration, tells us about the desire of the states to align with the processes of the European integration space. The objective of this article is to highlight the relations between Georgia and the EU, as well as the conditions under which the Republic of Moldova obtained the status of a candidate country for the EU. Also, this article is subject to an analysis of the conditions imposed by the EU regarding the resilience of the Republic of Moldova to European standards.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, status, candidate state, European integration.*

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Cebotari, PhD, Moldova State University in Chisinau. Email: svetlana.cebotari@mail.ru

<sup>2</sup> Vaktang Maisaia, PhD, Caucasus International University in Tbilisi. Email: vakhtang.maisaia@ciu.edu.ge

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Bevziuc, PhD, Moldova State University in Chisinau. Email: victoriabevziuc@yahoo.ro

## **Introduction**

The military aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022, has a direct impact on the relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union (EU) and Between Georgia and EU. Although the relations between the Republic of Moldova and Georgia and the EU were dynamic, the ‘special operation’ carried out by the Russian Federation in Ukraine conditioned the acceleration of the Moldovan-European and Georgian-European political dialogue. Today, the Moldovan-European and Georgian-European relations are conditioned especially by the events in Ukraine, which have oriented the vector of the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia versus the EU and show the state’s desire to align with the integrationist processes in the European space.

Also, lately, we are witnessing the acceleration of the foreign policy vision of the states of the Eastern Partnership associated with Trio (Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine) versus the EU, an acceleration influenced by the military aggression of the Russian Federation in Ukraine. Any war, especially of this intensity, which we are witnessing in Ukraine, is usually an element of political, and economic change, which also conditions changes on the dimension of security. Therefore, the war in Ukraine is an element of change for the entire relationship of the states of the Eastern Partnership with the European Union. In this context, we should recognize that the strategy adopted by the countries of the Eastern Partnership and by the European Union in general, in the context of the war, has changed the foreign policy approach of states such as Ukraine, Georgia, including the Republic of Moldova.

### **Moldovan-European relations in the context of the crisis in Ukraine**

For a better understanding of the Moldovan-European relations, influenced by the war in Ukraine, there is the need to highlight the main events present in the Republic of Moldova-EU dialogue. Of course, given the magnitude of the subject, we do not pretend to cover the multitude of aspects involved, but we will point out the most important moments.

Thus, on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022, Ukraine applied for EU membership, and the next day, on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022, MEPs approved by a majority of 637 votes the resolution that gives Ukraine a European perspective. For the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, which together with Ukraine are part of the associated trio of the Eastern Partnership countries group, this moment serves as the European perspective and the objective of becoming full members of the EU. In the circumstances of the war in Ukraine, two days away from Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova submitted applications for membership in the Union. For these countries, candidate status serves as a political shield of

protection from Russia, which has never agreed to the proximity of the Eastern Partnership associated Trio States to the EU<sup>4</sup>.

The step that brought the Republic of Moldova closer to the EU was the signing on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March, by President Maia Sandu of the application for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union. The request was also signed by Parliament President Igor Grosu and Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița, and forwarded to French President Emmanuel Macron, leader of the country holding the rotating presidency of the European Union<sup>5</sup>.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the speech of the head of state according to which “the citizens of the Republic of Moldova demonstrate to the world that they are a mature people” and that they do not allow “tyranny to settle in the country, [...] that we will live according to the rules when we defended democracy in elections”. In the conditions of the war in Ukraine, when the cannons are heard on the border of the Republic of Moldova, the citizens remain mature and offer help to refugees from the neighbouring country. “We also maintain our neutrality but remain solidary, calm, generous and responsible. Some decisions take time to ponder. It took us 30 years to grow up, during which failures and errors were committed. Currently, in the conditions of the war in Ukraine, according to the statement of President Sandu, we are ready to take responsibility for the future of the country. We want to live peacefully, in democracy as part of the free world.” According to the statement of President Sandu, “some decisions need time, others must be made promptly and decisively, using the opportunities offered by the changing landscape of the world. We must act immediately when circumstances require it and we see clearly the opportunity to ensure future generations a safer, better life. Achieving this goal is our duty to the citizens. The Republic of Moldova must have a clear European path. We are ready to do everything to achieve this fundamental national goal. Citizens have chosen this option. We know what steps we need to take and we are ready for this process. Step by step, resolutely, we will go through all the stages, in order to build the prosperous and peaceful future of the Republic of Moldova”, said Maia Sandu<sup>6</sup>.

According to the statements made by the Foreign Minister, Nicu Popescu, “this procedure is a historical one and a step of major importance for our

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<sup>4</sup> *Analiză. Integrarea Ucrainei, Georgiei și a Republicii Moldova în UE în timp de război: quo vadis?*, <<https://agora.md/stiri/99539/analiza-integrarea-ucrainei-georgiei-si-a-republicii-moldova-in-ue-in-timp-de-razboi-quo-vadis>> (23.12.2022).

<sup>5</sup> V. Ursu, N. Popescu, *Moldova a depus cererea de aderare la UE. Ce urmează?*, <<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/nicu-popescu-moldova-a-depus-cererea-de-aderare-la-ue-ce-urmeaz%C4%83-/31734555.html>> (23.12.2022).

<sup>6</sup> *Maia Sandu a semnat cererea de aderare a Republicii Moldova la UE*, <<https://www.dw.com/ro/maia-sandu-a-semnat-cererea-de-aderare-a-republicii-moldova-la-ue/a-61005520>> (23.12.2022).

country and society, it is a step in the direction of peace. The European Union is an institution, a family of countries that knew how to ensure peace on the European continent. For the Republic of Moldova accession to the European Union is a way of ensuring the peace, stability and freedom of our country”<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022, is a historical date for the Republic of Moldova, it is the date when the application for accession to the European Union was officially submitted. This step marks a significant change in relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, as the Republic of Moldova has officially started the EU accession process. This development of relations will have a significant effect on the EU’s requirements for the Republic of Moldova and on Moldova’s approach to the European Union. Even if the existing Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the EU is very demanding, the application for the accession of the Republic of Moldova will raise the requirements to a higher level. The application was submitted according to Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which provides that “any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and undertakes to promote them may apply to become a member of the Union”. Also, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, on the one hand, and the Republic of Moldova, on the other hand, recognize the European aspirations and the European choice of the Republic of Moldova.

Having regard to the common values and close links between the Parties, established in the past by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part, and which develops within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, and recognizing the common desire of the Parties to develop, strengthen and further expand their relations. Furthermore, following the provisions of the Agreement, the common values on which the EU is founded, namely democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, also constitute the very essence of political association and economic integration provided for in this Agreement. The agreement will open the way for future progressive developments in EU-Moldova relations. Recognizing that the Republic of Moldova, as a European country, has a common history and shares common values with the Member States and is committed to implementing and promoting these values, which are a source of inspiration for the European choice of the country. Also, recognizing the importance of the Action Plan for the implementation of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement contributes to the gradual economic integration and deepening of the political association. Committed to strengthening respect for fundamental freedoms,

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<sup>7</sup> V. Ursu, N. Popescu, *op. cit.*

human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, democratic principles, the rule of law, and good governance, efforts are being made on behalf of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova to develop a democratic and European country, integral and free<sup>8</sup>.

Using Article 2 of the Treaty of Accession to the European Union we can mention that the values on which the EU focuses are: “Respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, as well as respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society where pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”. Any potential future EU Member State will be assessed against these values. The country's ability to demonstrate its readiness to act following these values will be essential for EU membership. As the EU is at its core the largest European peace project of all time, sharing and promoting these common values becomes particularly important in the light of the war in Ukraine and other threats to European peace<sup>9</sup>.

In the strengthening Moldovan-European relations in the context of the war in Ukraine was the submission of the European Commission questionnaire on the application for EU membership of the Republic of Moldova, no less important moment<sup>10</sup>. After receiving Moldova's request, the Council invited the European Commission to present its opinion on Moldova's application as the EU's first step in the accession process. To draw up such an opinion, the Commission submitted a detailed questionnaire to the Republic of Moldova. Based on the questionnaire replies, which were developed and submitted by the Republic of Moldova, the Commission delivered its opinion with the following recommendations:

1. To recommend the granting of candidate status for Moldova and the possibility of Moldova starting accession negotiations;
2. To recommend the granting of candidate status, but only after the fulfilment of specific conditions by Moldova.

The EU Member States have decided on Moldova's application for EU membership, acting unanimously based on the Commission's opinion. Once the

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<sup>8</sup> *Cererea de aderare a Republicii Moldova la Uniunea Europeană – pași următorii și provocări*, <<https://eu4moldova.eu/ro/cererea-de-aderare-a-republicii-moldova-la-uniunea-europeana-pasi-urmatorii-si-provocari/>> (23.12.2022).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Șanse semnificative ca R. Moldova și Ucraina să primească statutul de țări candidate la UE. Opinia unui jurnalist, după dezbaterile de luni ale Comisiei Europene*, <<https://agora.md/stiri/103610/sanse-semnificative-ca-r-moldova-si-ucraina-sa-primeasca-statutul-de-tari-candidate-la-ue-opinia-unui-jurnalist-dupa-dezbaterile-de-luni-ale-comisiei-europene>> (23.12.2022).

Republic of Moldova has been granted candidate status, the date of the opening of EU accession negotiations has been set (most likely after the Republic of Moldova will meet additional conditions). Accession negotiations will be conducted until the country meets all EU accession requirements, in particular the requirements for political criteria, as the EU's fundamental values as defined in Article 2 TEU are assessed within the political criteria. Once the conditions for accession of the Republic of Moldova are agreed, the Accession Treaty is negotiated, approved and signed by Moldova and all EU Member States and the date of accession is set. Also, to legitimize this step, the Republic of Moldova will organize a referendum in which its citizens will decide on the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union. The Accession Treaty must also be approved by the European Parliament and ratified by the Republic of Moldova, as well as by the national parliament of each EU Member State before it enters into force.

The Commission's questionnaire is the first crucial step in the EU accession process, which will demonstrate Moldova's readiness to react with prompt and precise responses. The questionnaire, according to the position of the European officials, should be perceived as an image of the Republic of Moldova at the specific time of sending the answer, no more, no less. The last questionnaires developed for the Western Balkan countries contained 2.500-3.000 questions each. They were a snapshot of how each country worked and how close each country was to meet EU membership requirements when they submitted their questionnaire replies. For the Republic of Moldova, the number of questions is higher, to suit the specific circumstances of the country. The questions are multilayered and required the involvement of the entire state administration and numerous consultations between various state institutions. Further follow-up questions will then be sent to clarify the responses of the Republic of Moldova. The answers provided the European Commission with a clear picture of Moldova's readiness to conduct accession negotiations and the capacities of the Moldovan administration. Failure to answer a question or too long time to submit questionnaire replies will also be an indication of the lack of capacity of the Republic of Moldova. The questionnaire has also been structured in such a way as to comply with the format of the accession negotiations, which are organized in such a way as to include the Copenhagen accession criteria of 1993:

1. Political criteria: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
2. Economic criteria: a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competition and market forces; and
3. The ability to assume the obligations arising from EU membership, including the administrative and institutional capacity to effectively

implement the entire EU acquis (organized in more than 30 negotiating chapters).

Thus, on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2022, in Luxembourg, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi handed over to Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration Nicu Popescu the questionnaire of the European Commission on the application for EU membership of the Republic of Moldova. The answers to the questions in this questionnaire will be a radiography of the current situation in our country, showing the level of preparation for accession to the European Union and, at the same time, will highlight the areas where further efforts are needed. “Our country is accelerating its European path. We reiterated that we are part of Europe not only geographically, but also through the identity we bear, the values we share, through the Romanian language, the official language of the EU we speak and through the common history we have” Deputy Prime Minister Nicu Popescu said.

According to the position of the head of the diplomacy of the Republic of Moldova, from the moment of receipt of the questionnaire, there follows an intense period of work, mentioning that the state institutions are ready to provide the necessary information in the shortest time. At the same time, the Moldovan official communicated about the involvement in the process of completing the questionnaire not only of the authorities but also of the civil society, given that the accession to the European Union is a country project aimed at the future of each citizen. “Once again, we want to demonstrate that we are a country where democracy works, reforms are possible, processes of transformation are working and our European future is irreversible” – added Minister Nicu Popescu<sup>11</sup>.

The questions received were divided between the institutions of the newly established working groups (which will then be converted into negotiating groups) so that all competent bodies/actors could contribute to each question individually. The answer to a single question required the work of several institutions which, by common agreement, provided a common and uniform answer to that question. All responses within a chapter should be synchronized and a common response for the whole chapter should be defined. All chapters should be synchronized by the institution that runs the whole process. The final answers should be adopted by the Government and then sent to the European Commission from Brussels. Answers to all questions can amount to about 8.000-10.000 pages.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ministrul Nicu Popescu a recepționat chestionarul Comisiei Europene cu privire la cererea de aderare la UE a Republicii Moldova: „Țara noastră își accelerează parcursul european”*, <<https://mfa.gov.md/ro/content/ministrul-nicu-popescu-receptionat-chestionarul-comisiei-europene-cu-privire-la-cererea-de>> (23.12.2022).

Also, all answers (which will be prepared first in Romanian) must be translated by the Republic of Moldova into high-quality English. If the translation is not made properly, the quality of the responses of the Republic of Moldova will suffer and/or be inaccurate. In addition, all legislation of the Republic of Moldova (primarily laws and some regulations) that underlie the answers must also be translated into English and attached to the answers. Therefore, the Government of the Republic of Moldova should set up a translation service/unit to coordinate and ensure quality translation of questionnaire replies and relevant legislation and subsequently for all documents related to accession negotiations. The application for EU membership and the resulting questionnaire did not represent a challenge for the Republic of Moldova, as this represented the beginning of a completely different and broader level of relations with the European Union. This step is unknown and new. However, the past experiences of many countries (including all new EU Member States in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as most Western Balkan countries) that responded to the questionnaire provide a source for many lessons learned.

Since 2014, the Republic of Moldova implements the Association Agreement with the European Union. Whether there will be the necessary political support (recognizing that the answer to the future questionnaire is a strategic priority for the Republic of Moldova) and whether all the necessary administrative preparations will be carried out in the coming months (including the establishment of working groups and the organization of the translation process), then there is no reason to doubt that the Republic of Moldova can achieve this stage with as much success as many of the previous countries. The EU-funded technical assistance project “support for structured political dialogue, coordination of the implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) and improvement of the legal approximation process in the Republic of Moldova” provides the necessary support, based on the experience gained from the answers to the last questionnaire, as well as based on internal reorganization in different Western Balkan countries<sup>12</sup>.

A no less important step in Moldovan-European relations was the working visit of the Head of State to Brussels and Paris on 17-18 May 2022, during which Maia Sandu had meetings with the President of France, the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Belgium and the President of the EU Legislature<sup>13</sup>.

The speech of Maia Sandu, President of the Republic of Moldova, delivered on 18<sup>th</sup> May, at the European Parliament in Brussels, represents the

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<sup>12</sup> *Cererea de aderare a Republicii Moldova la Uniunea Europeană...*

<sup>13</sup> A. Baci, *Maia Sandu a ținut un discurs în Parlamentul European: Acordarea statutului de țară candidat este decizia cea bună (LIVE)*, <<https://agora.md/stiri/102605/maia-sandu-a-tinut-un-discurs-in-parlamentul-european-acordarea-statutului-de-tara-candidat-este-decizia-cea-buna-live>> (23.12.2022).



European desideratum and aspirations of the Republic of Moldova: “I condemned the Russian war against Ukraine. We support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as we have always done. Crimea is Ukraine, Donbas is Ukraine, Kyiv is Ukraine.” Also, Maia Sandu left no doubt about an essential request which depends on the movement of her country toward the free world: “Moldova is, according to the Constitution, a neutral state – a provision that is supported by the majority of citizens. However, to be truly neutral, we call for the withdrawal of Russian troops from our territory, because their presence in the Transnistrian region fundamentally violates our neutrality and independence”. The Russian troops in the separatist enclave, the existence of this conflict ‘lit’ and ‘frozen’ by the Russians, according to the mafia principle: I create the problem for you so that you come to me to clear it and give me something in return, if you do not want me to amplify it more (See also the ‘Minsk 1’ and ‘Minsk 2’ agreement simulacrum around Donbas) – this conflict was and remains the millstone that has so far submerged Romanian and pro-Europeans aspirations of Basarabians.

Maia Sandu also spoke about the economic crisis, about the inflation that reached a record 27% due to the pandemic and the war, and asked the Western democracies to help Moldova return the money stolen by the oligarchs fleeing to the West and also to the country to give the criminals to the prosecutors. It is one of the basic electoral commitments of the current power: The recovery of stolen billions would ease the burden of expenses for Moldovans<sup>14</sup>. In Brussels, Maia Sandu discussed with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, the agenda for Moldova’s European integration. NN speech in the European Parliament, the Moldovan president insisted on offering the status of candidate country for Moldova – a signal of encouragement and support for the program of reforming the country according to the European model. Moldovans need this clear prospect of accession to coagulate around this goal. Without a tangible national idea that unites them, they will oscillate indefinitely, from an electoral point of view, between West and East

The status of the candidate country would also mobilize the authorities to identify real solutions to two big problems that Moldova has because of accession: the Transnistrian problem and cleanliness in the justice field. “The completion of the integration will be possible only when the Transnistrian problem is solved, but this should not prevent us from working on the other files”, said MEP Siegfried Mureșan. And Chisinau is linking its hopes for the settlement of the Transnistrian dispute with a possible victory of Ukraine in the war launched by Russia against it – a victory that would radically change the optic of the pro-Russian separatist regime on the left bank of the Dniester River.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*

Also, according to the statements of President Sandu on the eve of the visit to Brussels, Chisinau does not expect to be spared in the process of Eurointegration and is ready to take full responsibility for this path. According to the President of the Republic of Moldova, there is no competition between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in the process of obtaining the status of a candidate for accession, and Kyiv deserves to be privileged in this respect. “We believe in meritocracy and every country will be judged by merit. It is also better for Ukraine to be part of the EU, but for us, it is better for Ukraine to join,” explained President Maia Sandu<sup>15</sup>.

In the context of the Republic of Moldova obtaining the status of candidate for EU accession, Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă had on 31<sup>st</sup> May a discussion with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen and with the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola. During this discussion, the importance of the European Commission issuing a positive opinion on Moldova’s EU accession application was underlined. The Romanian official asked the Brussels executive to recognize the prospect of Chisinau’s European integration and to recommend the status of the candidate for EU membership. Another topic of discussion was the importance of the European Union’s active support of the European path of the Republic of Moldova, as well as of the reforms initiated by the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu<sup>16</sup>.

Against the background of the war in Ukraine, Chisinau was visited by several European officials, including EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell and European Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi. The visit is important as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called for his country to be admitted to the European Union through an emergency procedure, signing a formal request for Ukraine’s EU membership.

The date of 19<sup>th</sup> May 2022, for the Republic of Moldova is an important one. It is the date when the European Parliament adopted the annual report on the implementation of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, with 512 votes in favour, 43 votes against and 39 abstentions. The report includes a call on the European Union to provide more strategic support to Moldova after the application for membership of the bloc is submitted. In the context of a deteriorating security environment, the text acknowledges that the war in

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<sup>15</sup> *Statutul de candidat la aderare ar fi ideea națională care ar coagula moldovenii*, <<https://www.dw.com/ro/statutul-de-candidat-la-aderare-ar-fi-ideea-na%C8%9Bional%C4%83-care-ar-coagula-moldovenii/a-61837566>> (23.12.2022).

<sup>16</sup> C. Bolotnicov, *Prim-ministrul României solicită Comisiei Europene să recomande acordarea statutului de țară candidată la aderarea la UE pentru R. Moldova*, <<https://agora.md/stiri/103127/prim-ministrul-romaniei-solicita-comisiei-europene-sa-recomande-acordarea-statutului-de-tara-candidata-la-aderarea-la-ue-pentru-r-moldova>> (23.12.2022).

Ukraine has disproportionately affected the Republic of Moldova. Its economy has been affected by the loss of import and export opportunities and the rapid increase in energy prices, and Moldova has also received the highest number of Ukrainian refugees relative to the population than any other country, putting pressure on public services.

Motivated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moldova's official application for EU membership on 3<sup>rd</sup> March was welcomed by MEPs, as it confirms the country's European path. They call on the EU institutions to grant Moldova the status of candidate country, together with Ukraine and Georgia, following Article 49 TEU and 'based on merit'. Meanwhile, MEPs believe that the European Union and the Republic of Moldova should continue to work on the country's integration into the EU's single market.

The resolution calls on the European Commission to help Moldova prepare a credible strategy for the pre-accession period. MEPs also draw attention to the need for more strategic assistance for Moldova, in particular by setting up a Commission support group for this country, similar to the one existing for Ukraine. The report also stresses that the accession applications of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia open a new chapter in their European integration, which should be characterized by enhanced efforts to implement Association agreements and trade liberalization components. Last but not least, MEPs express their concern about some recent security incidents in the separatist region of Transnistria and condemn them as dangerous acts of provocation committed in a highly volatile security situation. They reiterate their support for a peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. "The EU must urgently grant Moldova and Ukraine the status of candidate countries," said Romanian rapporteur Dragos Tudorache, from Renew Europe group. "This is a message to the world that the EU supports and with which we share the same values in a concrete, tangible and committed way. It is a message to Putin and all the dictators of the world that we will remain United in the face of any aggression and such actions will only strengthen us"<sup>17</sup>.

The text of the resolution states that the Republic of Moldova was disproportionately affected by the Russian war in Ukraine. This is mainly due to the arrival of more than 450.000 Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the invasion – of which almost 80.000 remained in the Republic of Moldova – but also due to the decrease in trade and the increase in energy and transport prices. To this end, MEPs call on the EU to provide more support to the country, namely through new macro-financial assistance, additional measures

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<sup>17</sup> I. Chirtoc, *Sprijin masiv din partea Parlamentului European pentru aderarea Republicii Moldova la UE. Rezoluția privind statutul de țară candidată*, <<https://ziare.com/razboi-ucraina-rusia/aderare-ue-republica-moldova-parlamentul-european-1741909>> (23.12.2022).

to liberalize transport and trade, and continued support for refugee management and humanitarian purposes.

In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the Parliament welcomes Moldova's official application for EU membership lodged on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022 and states that the EU should grant it candidate status, following Article 49 TEU and "based on merit". In the meantime, the European Union and the Republic of Moldova should continue their efforts to integrate the country into the EU single market and strengthen sectoral cooperation. MEPs also call on the European Commission to swiftly complete the assessment of the application and to provide Moldova with full assistance during this process. They say that, without anticipating the content of the Commission's opinion, the Moldovan authorities are undoubtedly on the right path through the adoption of key reforms, in particular as regards democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

The resolution also expresses its deep concern about developments in the territory of the Transnistrian region, which recorded a series of 'security incidents' in April 2022 considered by MEPs as dangerous provocative acts in a highly volatile security situation. They also reiterate Parliament's support for a "comprehensive, peaceful and sustainable political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict", namely based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders, as well as the withdrawal of Russian forces stationed there.

Parliament stresses that it is unacceptable for Russia to use gas supplies as a weapon to exert political pressure on Moldova, and to influence the country's political trajectory and geopolitical orientation, especially after the recent establishment of the country's pro-Western government. MEPs call on the Commission and EU countries to support Moldova in ensuring its energy independence, connectivity, diversification and energy efficiency, as well as in accelerating the development of renewable energy sources<sup>18</sup>.

Through the 'historic' decision taken unanimously by EU leaders, Ukraine and Moldova have been granted the status of candidate countries for EU membership. By granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, the paradigm of EU enlargement has changed, and the enlargement policy has received a new impulse, calling the decision of EU leaders a 'big step' and a historical step.

During a press conference, held following the decision of the European Commission, the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, came with a message to the citizens. "With yesterday's decision, the EU member states confirmed their desire to support the Republic of Moldova in the process

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<sup>18</sup> PE: UE trebuie să acorde Republicii Moldova statutul de țară candidată la aderare, <<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/ro/press-room/20220429IPR28232/pe-ue-trebuie-sa-acorde-republicii-moldova-statutul-de-tara-candidata>> (23.12.2022).

of preparing to join the EU family. We are grateful for this opening. (...) this event does not change things overnight in our country, but it gives us greater support on the path of the EU. (...) the status of the candidate country gives us a clear direction of development, support on this path and, more importantly, hope” – says Maia Sandu.

Also, according to the statements of the President of Romania, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have received a new impulse to implement the reforms and projects that are still necessary to take the next step in the historical achievement. Giving the European perspective to the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia are important step forward. This decision brings hope and confidence to the European future for the people of these countries and represents a great responsibility for their leaders. Romania is ready to continue supporting Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia on their European path. In this context, the statements of Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă who welcomed the ‘historic decision’ and promised that Romania will remain firm in supporting the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia on their European path. EU leaders stressed that these countries will have many ‘themes to do’ and that, having started the most ambitious enlargement since Eastern European countries joined after the Cold War, they will have a lot of ‘themes to do’. the EU may need to change its mode of operation to deal with it. According to the statement of Ukraine’s EU Ambassador, Cențov Vsevolod, “the green light received by these two states is a signal to Russia that Ukraine, but also other countries of the former Soviet Union, are not obliged to remain within the Russian sphere of influence”<sup>19</sup>.

Although the Republic of Moldova received on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2022 the status of candidate country for accession to the European Union, this status does not offer the status of EU member state, as Moldova needs to meet many accession conditions, as well as apply European legislation in all areas. Experts in the field of international relations and European integration mention that the European path of the Republic of Moldova is difficult and that, in the context of the challenges faced by the EU, but also the countries with the status of candidate for accession, it can last for an unpredicted period. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called the 23<sup>rd</sup> June event “a defining moment and a very good day for Europe”. The President of the European Commission reiterates that “there can be no better sign of hope for the citizens of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in these troubled times”. As for the reforms to be undertaken in the accession process, President von der Leyen

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<sup>19</sup> *Moment istoric: Moldova și Ucraina au primit statutul de țări candidate la aderarea la UE. Ce urmări ar putea avea această decizie,*  
<<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/ue/klaus-iohannis-participa-la-consiliul-european-liderii-ue-discuta-cererile-de-aderare-ale-ucrainei-republicii-moldova-si-georgiei-1985665>>  
(23.12.2022).

notes that they are beneficial for the new candidate countries and their democracy, as they strengthen competitiveness and ultimately benefit their citizens. Ursula von der Leyen also said that this decision will “further strengthen” the EU, in the context of threats from the Russian Federation. “The decision taken [...] strengthens Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in the face of Russian aggression. And it strengthens the European Union because it once again shows the world that the European Union is United and strong in the face of external threats”. In the context of the statements made by the European leaders regarding the obtaining of Republic of Moldova the status of candidate country for EU accession, the statements of the Romanian Ambassador to the Republic of Moldova deserve attention. Thus, according to Sorin Ionita, in the process of EU accession, Moldova must solve two major problems in order not to stagnate in this process: “The first basic problem is maintaining the popular consensus for the Western/EU direction because public opinion is important and can derail the process, such as the (unofficially expressed) doubts that everyone in Europe has about the popular support of the EU agenda in Serbia, which has created political bottlenecks. The second is Transnistria.” With the accession of the EU candidate country, the tasks of the governors are multiple, but inevitably or unknowingly some major responsibilities can be omitted or simply considered non-essential, which would be a major error. Here we will not refer to other escapes that seem, apparently, insignificant because they are not expressly exposed in the firm commitments that the Republic of Moldova assumes in this context. Thus, the country risks remaining captive to the status of candidate for integration for more than 30-50 years. The EU has granted this status for 2 reasons: the existence of a pro-Euro-PAS governance and the presence in the region of the war in Ukraine as a political antidote against Russian aggression in the neighbouring state<sup>20</sup>. Also, Sorin Ionita claims that the accession paths of Romania and the Republic of Moldova are different<sup>21</sup>. The Republic of Moldova’s relationship with the European Union brings security support to Romania even in the context of the war in Ukraine<sup>22</sup> of 150 million euros for Moldova’s support. The assistance is made up of non-reimbursable funds of EUR 30 million and loans on advantageous terms of EUR 120 million. The Republic of Moldova is a European country, which has

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<sup>20</sup> M. Coștu, *Una-i să obțin statutul de candidat la aderare în UE, alta-i să-l și păstrezi*, “Moldova Suverană”, 19.07.2022, p. 1-3.

<sup>21</sup> O. Meica, *Republica Moldova – țară candidată pentru aderarea la Uniunea Europeană. Care sunt pașii următori și cât poate dura perioada de aderare*, <<https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/r-moldova-tara-candidata-pentru-aderarea-la-uniunea-europeana-care-sunt-pasii-urmatori-si-cat-poate-dura-perioada-de-aderare/>> (23.12.2022).

<sup>22</sup> *Expert: Chestionarul e o treaptă, reformele sunt scara spre Uniunea Europeană*, <<https://stiri.md/article/social/expert-chestionarul-e-o-treapta-reformele-sunt-scara-spre-uniunea-europeana>> (23.12.2022).

received the largest number of refugees from Ukraine in proportion to its population. More than 370.000 refugees crossed the border of the Republic of Moldova (Republica Moldova va primi). Thus, the Plenum of the European Parliament by a large majority, 558 votes in favour and 10 abstentions and 20 against decided to grant macroeconomic assistance to the Republic of Moldova<sup>23</sup>.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, Oliver Varhelej, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement mentioned that the EU increased the budget support provided to the Republic of Moldova. The EUR 6 million support provided in December 2021 for the management of the energy crisis is supported by another EUR 75 million. The money was offered to overcome the challenges posed by Russian military aggression in Ukraine. In addition to managing the crisis, the EU continues to support the long-term resilience of the Republic of Moldova, in particular through the Eastern Partnership Investment Plan, which involves providing 34 billion EUR for public and private investment in the public and private investment in several key areas: support for SMEs, trade facilitation, energy efficiency<sup>24</sup>.

### **The EU-Georgia relations in the context of the Ukrainian crisis**

The EU-Georgia relations have been transformed in the geopolitical frame and developed more dynamic manner since 2013. Georgia's gradual integration into the European structures represents one of the most important directions of the nation's political and economic development. Strengthening the cooperation with the EU supports the further promotion of Georgia's democratic institutions and security, as well as the development of foreign-trade relations with the EU. Broadening institutional frameworks of the relationship with the European Union is important for Georgia. Georgia intends to gain the Four Freedoms (free movement of people, goods, services, and capital) with the EU. The majority of the population of Georgia considers the European Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership as significant aspects contributing to Georgia's integration into the EU. Georgia conducted negotiations and on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2014, when signed the Association Agreement with the EU to achieve a higher level of political association and economic integration with this organization, including the development of deep and comprehensive free trade relations. Georgia pays important attention to the successful implementation of the visa simplification and readmission agreements with the EU, with the final goal, to achieve visa-free travel.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *UE își extinde sprijinul bugetar pentru Moldova, "Moldova Suverană", 22.07.2022, p. 1.*

Furthermore, Georgia strives to establish sectoral cooperation with the EU in energy security, transport, education, culture, and other spheres is important for Georgia. The country does its best for the involvement of the EU in resolving the Russian-Georgian conflict and de-occupation of the two historic Regions of Georgia by peaceful means. EU must recognise the occupation by the Russian Federation two territories of Georgia<sup>25</sup>.

It is of strategic importance to Georgia that the EU represents the mediator of the Russian-Georgian Ceasefire Agreement of 12<sup>th</sup> August 2008, and continues its diplomatic pressure on the Russian Federation to respect the norms and principles of international law and the international obligations it has undertaken<sup>26</sup>.

The main EU-Georgia cooperation objectives and priority fields are outlined in three key documents: the Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013 (CSP), the National Indicative Program 2007-2010 (NIP) and EU-Georgia Association Agreement (signed on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

The Country Strategy Paper, prepared by the European Commission, covers the political, economic, social and institutional situation in Georgia. The report assesses when and how relations with the country can deepen and is the basis on which a political decision is taken for the next stage – the Action Plan. Georgia's CSP includes eight priority areas for action: Rule of Law, Improvement of Business Climate, Economic Development and Poverty Reduction, Cooperation on Justice, Law, Security (JLS) and Border Management, Regional Cooperation, Resolution of Internal Conflicts, Cooperation on Foreign and Security Policy, Transport and Energy. EU Georgian relation comprises Political and economic relations, technical and financial cooperation, infrastructure, environment and rural development, human rights, democratization and Civil society building, assistance in justice, achieving freedom and security, education, health, and social development.

Georgia has made significant progress in carrying out economic reforms in the last few years. To create a sustainable environment for economic development, the European Union (EU) has provided assistance to Georgia in reforming its tax collection administration and procedures and fighting corruption. It has thus contributed to opening up the country to foreign investment, facilitating trade and empowering the private sector as a driver of economic growth. The EU supports also the Regional development policy of Georgia to create new economic development opportunities in Georgian

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<sup>25</sup> *European Parliament resolution of 17 November 2011 containing the European Parliament's recommendations to the Council, the Commission and the EEAS on the negotiations of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (2011/2133(INI))*, <[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2011-0514\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2011-0514_EN.html)> (04.12.2022).

<sup>26</sup> *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, (2011)*, <[http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=12](http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=12)> (04.12.2022).



regions. Trade cooperation is a key issue on the country's agenda since Georgia is engaged in a preparatory process for a Deep and Comprehensive Trade Agreement (DCFTA).

For human rights, the main source of funding comes through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) which has financed a wide variety of projects in Georgia since 1998, both through large projects managed from Brussels and through the micro-projects which are managed directly by the European Union Delegation to Georgia.

The relatively new Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development Program are aimed at developing the capacities of these two entities to support all aspects of the participative democracy process at a local level, as well as building cooperation between them in the pursuit of this goal. On the central level, the EU works to strengthen key pillars of good governance. Support for the development of independent media has been delivered through several projects such as training for the Georgian Public Broadcaster and strengthening of the role of the media as a watchdog in Georgian society. Over the years, the Georgian Parliament has benefitted from a variety of actions, both in terms of material support in the shape of equipment and library resources, as well as in the reform of its administrative procedures. All aspects of the electoral system have received intensive support from the EU. In this area, the EU has employed a multi-vector approach, supporting efforts to reform the legislative framework, working with the election administration officials, providing training for non-partisan election observers and strengthening media awareness of their rights. Support to civil society is mainstreamed through all the above-mentioned instruments, as well as increasingly through sector support and budget support programs. Increased involvement of civil society is an aspect of its cooperation to which the EU is firmly committed.

Assistance to a broad field of legal and administrative reform has been one of the key areas of the European Union's assistance to Georgia since the early 90ties. Since the November 2003, 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia, the EU assistance was strongly focused on the reforms of the justice system in Georgia. At the new stage of the Georgia-EU cooperation, EU-Georgia Action Plan puts special emphasis on cooperation in the fields of Rule of Law and Justice.

The EU has within this broader area of assistance provided support in a variety of areas related to Justice, Freedom and Security also. These projects have covered an array of specific fields within the sector and were implemented by using different funding instruments. In the area of fighting against illegal drugs, the EU has provided funding for the regional South Caucasus Anti-drug Program.

The EU has supported Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to implement selected projects in the field of migration under different

instruments. The Georgian Government has achieved measurable progress in certain areas of cooperation under Justice, Freedom and Security, notably the fight against human trafficking, however, the other fields of cooperation in this sector remain to need additional contributions for achieving sustainable positive results. The EU has made considerable contributions to the criminal justice system reform in Georgia through various projects aiming at capacity building of key justice sector institutions, providing expertise on legal and structural reforms and more importantly, through being engaged in a structured policy dialogue with the Georgian Government on Criminal Justice reforms. Assistance in these areas is delivered through many different instruments and programs allowing the European Union (EU) to employ a variety of approaches at a central, regional or local level, depending on what is most effective in the given context.

In the field of Higher Education, there are several programs (TEMPUS, ERASMUS MUNDUS, Jean Monnet) facilitating higher education institutions' cooperation with European universities, and increasing the mobility of students, researchers and university staff. Through various programs, the EU greatly supports the progress towards integration of the Georgian Vocational Education and Training (VET) system into the common European educational space<sup>27</sup>.

The European Union is supporting the government in the implementation of the Primary Health Care Reform Program aimed at improving the equitable coverage and utilization of quality Primary Health Care services by the Georgian population in several regions of Georgia. Civil society representatives are also grantees of the EU and are involved in the capacity building of the non-governmental and community-based organizations for achieving better access by the poor people of Georgia to quality health care, improving access to the quality primary health care for the vulnerable population. The case of child welfare reform is also a field in which the EU is very active which includes improving the quality and coverage of the services provided to children, ensuring that all children in need of support in Georgia can benefit from quality, individualized social services, that children in need are where possible kept in their families or a family-like care environment and that every child in Georgia is protected by the State from all types of abuse, exploitation and neglect. Moreover, there are three main directions where the EU and Georgia are cooperating and the directions are having more geoeconomic importance rather than geopolitical ones. The directions include the following:

1. Transport. Due to its strategic geographical location, Georgia is a crucial hub and a key transit point for the whole Caucasus and beyond. Furthermore, improving the transport infrastructure is a crucial requirement for the country to achieve in full its economic and social

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<sup>27</sup> I. Chkhikvadze, *EU-Georgia Relations: Where It Starts and Where It Goes*, Tbilisi 2013.

development objectives. In response to this context, the European Union (EU) is actively involved in assisting Georgia to improve its transport networks (aviation, railways and marine transportation). Most of the transport-related initiatives assisted by the EU in Georgia are implemented through the TRACECA Program (Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia)<sup>28</sup>. TRACECA is an ambitious regional action aimed at supporting the political and economic development in the Black Sea Region, Caucasus and Central Asia using the improvement of international transport<sup>29</sup>;

2. Energy. Energy issues become more and more important for both Georgia and the EU. It has been reflected among others in the Eastern Partnership initiative. Within its framework, the cooperation between the EU and the partner countries will be enhanced in several energy-related areas (creating regional electricity markets, improving energy efficiency and promoting renewable energy, developing mutual energy support and security mechanisms, etc.). The EU has recently carried out a feasibility study for the project ‘Trans-Caspian-Black-Sea gas corridor’; The EU has financed numerous projects within the framework of its INOGATE program – mainly technical assistance; The Georgian Policy and Legal Advice Centre (GEPLAC), financed by the EU, has assisted the government concerning the energy policy and legislation, recently in the preparation of a law on energy efficiency<sup>30</sup>;
3. Environment. Georgia is one of the richest countries in the world when it comes to the diversity and uniqueness of its environment. The protection of the environment is among the key objectives of the European Union worldwide. The EU assists Georgia not only to implement concrete environmental projects but also helps draft policies, strategies and legislation<sup>31</sup>.

The activities financed by the EU concern all the key areas of environmental protection – climate change, nature protection, waste management, air protection, water protection and prevention of natural disasters. Many activities also focus on raising awareness about the environment and on encouraging communities to get involved in environmental protection. Management of solid waste is one of the most serious environmental problems in Georgia – both hazardous and municipal waste is

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<sup>28</sup> TRACECA main page, *Current/Upcoming News 23rd September 2014*, <<http://www.traceca-org.org/en/home/>> (04.12.2022).

<sup>29</sup> N. Chitadze, *Geopolitics*, Tbilisi 2011.

<sup>30</sup> N. Chitadze, F. Gursoy, *Economic and Political Environment of Georgia after the Restoration of National Independence*, [in:] *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, Brussels 2012.

<sup>31</sup> G. Chufrin, *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, Oxford 2001.

mostly dumped in landfills, dangerous both for human health and the environment or even dumped in nature. The EU approach is based on recycling, reusing and composting waste from households on one hand and safe disposal of hazardous waste on the other. The EU approach to water protection is based on the integrated management of river basins. These basins usually cover the territory of several countries. The largest one in the southern Caucasus is the Kura-Aras river basin. The EU helps countries of the southern Caucasus to protect this river basin through several projects (ca EUR 5 million for Georgia) by developing their water legislation, collecting the necessary data, providing them with laboratory equipment for monitoring water quality, etc. The EU is also very active in the protection of the Black Sea and its coast. Air prevention: the quality of air, especially in major Georgian cities, is rather poor. The EU, therefore, helps Georgia to measure the number of dangerous substances in the air and to draft legislation and strategies to improve the current situation.

Natural and man-made disasters, such as landslides, erosions, droughts and floods, become more and more frequent in Georgia. The EU, therefore, helps the most affected regions, especially in the mountains, in the prevention and reduction of natural disaster risks. At the same time, the EU enables these regions to respond to these disasters in a coordinated and efficient manner. EUR 2 million has been granted in this sector.

However, the bilateral relations could be transformed into a concrete geo-economic development case with direct involvement of the Caucasus region. In this case, Georgia is going to seek the most vital position. However, it is less probable that Georgia would take part in the format as its foreign policy orientation prescribed in Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution adopted in 2020 is making impossible such participation (the Article implies irreversible foreign policy goals achievement in membership in NATO and EU structures). Moreover, Georgia earlier proposed its regional security format '3' (with the participation of all three local actors: Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia) and that is precisely fitted in the aegis of the Western identification of the region as 'Central Caucasus'. It is very clear that the Georgian approach to the regional security format is unfit for the other actors and evermore contradicts their interests. It seems that key regional hegemony: Russia, Turkey and Iran are eager to block any entrance to the region of other global and regional hegemonies, like the USA, the EU and maybe to some extent even China. The modality of the regional security is indeed oriented toward the East and by its geostrategic provision has a so-called 'orientalist' provision with aiming of creating new kinds of geopolitical axes: 'MENA-Transcaucasia-Central Asia' with partial incursion as well as South Asia as India and Pakistan are also seeking to pursue their interests to the 'geopolitical triangle'. Namely, Pakistan has joined the tripartite military alliance: Azerbaijan-Turkey which was formed in November 2020 due to the Karabakh war consequences Pakistan has also

been participating in the project: 'One Belt, One Road' launched by China and promoted the 'Oriental Silk Road' perspectives toward the Caucasus region. The same rest for the other geopolitical project: the 'Lazurit Project' (namely the realization of the project was linked realization of the Anaklia seaport building in nature) that also geo-economically pinches Pakistan and India into the region. As for both countries, Pakistan and India despite their rivalry, separately, are looking forward to realizing fully the other newly endorsed geoeconomic project: Pakistan-Iran-Azerbaijan-Georgia-EU thus boosting the most interesting geopolitical axes: 'South-North'. Quite recently as it is known has been arranged a deal between Iran and Azerbaijan on building 4 ride bridge on river Astarachai as it fastens cargo delivery several times and reaches turnover in both directions up to 80 million tonnes annually that more increased EU-Iran trade turnover that is now at the rate of \$5 billion (the same rate for EU-Pakistan is \$11 billion and for EU-India is about \$62 billion). The project is to be a continuation of the so-called 'Zanzegour Corridor' and promote dialogue among the regional actors. It is clear also that the '3+3' exactly reoriented toward Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution and attained common geostrategic provisions sponsored by Türkiye and Russia. Hence, the regional security format '3+3' is a joint Turkish-Russo project and has also correlations with the adjustment of the common geopolitical interests in the Middle East in the aegis of the Syrian crisis.

## **Conclusions**

The war in Ukraine and increased attention to this region opened an opportunity for associated states in the Eastern Neighbourhood, including the Republic of Moldova, by unanimous decision from EU member states to obtain EU membership. Although this status does not imply EU membership, it is still a possibility, but also a hope of Moldova's accession to the EU.

After obtaining the status of candidate country for EU accession, the Republic of Moldova will benefit from several advantages, such as a concrete prospect of accession to the European Union, fair justice, resilient public institutions, access to an extensive international market for Moldovan producers, sustainable development, economic and energy independence, etc. The Republic of Moldova's obtaining the status of candidate country for EU accession is a remarkable result of the efforts to be put in by the country and the government, and the EU will continue to support the reforms necessary to bring Moldova closer to the European community.

The EU-Georgia relations are considered to be developing more stable and predicted stage as Georgia was granted 'European Perspective' status instead of 'Membership Candidate'. The European Commission recommended to the Council that Georgia should be given the perspective to become a member of

the European Union. The body recommended that the country be granted the membership candidate status once the priority items on the reform agenda are addressed<sup>32</sup>. The Commission will monitor Georgia's progress to address these priorities and report on them by the end of 2023. The EU leadership identified 12 concrete political problems causing problems in promoting Georgia's membership in the European Community. The problems are identified in directions as high levels of polarization in the political system of Georgia, corruption, rule of law, organized crime groups, etc. These obstacles are the main problematic cases for attaining Georgia's constitutional clause in membership to EU and NATO and create a security dilemma for Georgia's foreign policy.

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<sup>32</sup> *Borell: Georgia will be granted “automatic” EU candidate status when criteria are met (23 June 2022)*, <<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/2396>> (04.12.2022).

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