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WHAT THE EU HAS TO OFFER TO MOLDOVA

BRIDGING THE CAPABILITY-EXPECTATIONS GAP OF THE EU-MOLDOVA RELATION

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Introduction

The 2004/2007 enlargement of the European Union represented one of the most successful instances of EU foreign policy actions, but the resulting borders also brought a new series of dilemmas. Difficult neighbours made difficult demands to the expanding Union. The Republic of Moldova is one of the countries that entered the focus of the EU foreign policy in the context created by the 'big bang' enlargement. Moldova represents the typical difficult eastern neighbour with its uncertain national identity caused by the constant oscillation between two poles of attraction, Romania and the Russian Federation, with its precarious economic and state structures and with reintegration still formulated as a desiderate, with difficult tensions to settle with the separatist groups of Transnistria, catalogued as the 'black hole' of Europe (European Parliament 2002: 6). Nevertheless, Moldova also holds the potential of becoming the success story of EU's policy in the area.

This research paper will analyze the recent evolution of the relations between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova, with a particular focus on EU's stance on the matter. Our research will explore the level of engagement of the European Union this relationship. This thesis is, therefore, less concerned with the comprehensiveness of the reforms undergone in Moldova and with its level of commitment. Nevertheless, the Moldovan government's expectations of the EU cannot be disregarded when assessing the effectiveness of EU's policies in the area; the Moldovan elite's commitment is an important component contributing to the establishment of EU's objectives. The subject will, consequently, be briefly touched upon. We will use as a guiding instrument in our research the theoretical framework offered by the prominent capabilities-expectations gap thesis developed by Hill (Hill 1993). What level of commitment does the EU invest in its relationship with Moldova? What are the expectations of the Moldovan government with regard to EU's involvement in the country? What are the instruments available for the EU to respond to the objectives of this relationship? Is there a capabilities-expectations gap between the real ambitions of the EU, the expectations of the Moldovan government and the actual participation of the EU in the relationship? We will argue that the EU-Moldova relationship does not suffer from a capabilities-expectations gap, since the real involvement of the EU and its presence in the area have been congruent with the existing level of European self-commitment and with the actual level of commitment emanating from the Moldovan side.

This novel approach brings a qualitatively new framework for evaluating the EU-Moldova relations. The capabilities-expectation gap concept has been applied only sporadically and superficially to the study of the EU-Moldova relations and never in a profound manner, following the evolution of the relation between the two partners.

This study answers questions of great current interest, given the fast pace of the current political evolution in Moldova which experienced a mini-revolution in April 2009, followed by a precarious and instable governance alliance which still lacks consolidation. The evolution of Moldova and the foreign policy orientation it will adopt for the medium and long term are still difficult to predict at this point, when the internal political scene is more polarized than ever and when the coming elections engage more and more substantial action from the two main poles of external attraction of Moldova – the EU and the Russian Federation. For example the recent embargo imposed by the Russian Federation has the appearance of a 'd  j  -vu' and considering the fact that the electoral campaign for the coming elections has *de facto* begun, 'the timing may be more than a matter of chance'.¹ The implications of the political and ideological evolution in Moldova are of great consequence for the European Union and the success of EU's policy in the case of Moldova could also suggest answers to a more general and just as imperative question on the role of the EU in its neighbourhood and the quality of its attraction force given the currently used instruments and approaches.

The first part of this research paper will present the capabilities-expectation gap theoretical model and will explore its explanatory potencies in assessing EU's role in the international system, with a particular focus on the interaction with the Republic of Moldova. In the second part of the paper, we will look at the main variables affecting the EU-Moldova relations and assess the incentives and drawbacks they impose on the evolution of the relationship. We will take into consideration the economic dimension, linked with the resulting security aspects, the ideological and the geopolitical dimensions affecting the foundations of the partnership. These dimensions are typically employed when describing EU's external relations, providing a comprehensive toolbox to contextualize the relation presently under scrutiny. The third part of the study will present the major reference points in the evolution of the EU-Moldova relationship. The capabilities-expectations gap model will be used to interpret the evolution of the relationship.

¹ Interview with MFAIE official;

The results will show that the European Union has acted in conformity to its actual interests and proportionately with the commitment of the Moldovan part and consequently that the expectations enshrined in this relationship were constantly matched with proportional capabilities.

We will conclude in a normative vein by highlighting the mutual of a deeper relation between the two partners. As shown by the recent turbulences in the area, the EU has much to lose from the destabilization of Moldova and much to win from the consolidation of democracy. Moreover, given the current instability of the Moldovan governance system, the EU is presented with the moral imperative of taking an active stance in supporting the reformist government which is trying to redress Moldova back to its European vocation. Moldova could very well be the success story of the Eastern Partnership, proving the firmness of EU's promises to its Eastern neighbours and making a good example of effective engagement in the eastern periphery.

The capability-expectations gap – a new conceptual framework in the assessment of the EU-Moldova relations

The capability-expectations gap is a theoretical tool designed by Hill (C Hill, 1993) which aims at conceptualizing the role of the EU in the international system by taking into consideration two aspects: its functions in interactions with other actors and the perceptions displayed by the interacting parties of its role. This instrument assesses the impact of EU's foreign policy within the framework set by two conceptual demarcation points: *actorness* and *presence*. In Hill's interpretation, an assessment of EU's capabilities in its external interactions should take into consideration 'its cohesiveness, resources and operational capacity' (Hill 1993: 321). The expectations element comprises both the internal and external expectations addressed to the EU. The perceptions held by the Union's interacting parties matter when addressing the international role of the EU; recognition from the other actors of the international system represents the *sine qua non* condition for actorness, an implicit element of the capabilities class and a precondition for the issuance of external expectations. Hill concludes his study by stating that:

'The Community does not have the resources or the political structure to be able to respond to the demands which the Commission and some member states have virtually invited through their bullishness over the pace of international change.' (Hill 1993: 315)

Although there is an extensive literature debating EU's role in the international system using the capability-expectations gap, complemented by an expanding literature on the evolution of the EU-Moldova relations, this research is innovative because it provides the missing link between these two separate lines of academic enquiry. The theoretical study of the European Neighbourhood Policy in particular has been very often conducted along the lines of the capability-expectations gap framework, but usually with a very general focus, avoiding the detail and singularities of individual cases. For instance, K.E. Smith (2005a) analyses the weaknesses of the ENP taking into consideration the limited incentives the EU can offer to its neighbourhood partners. The theoretical debate usually concentrates on the EU's limited impact on its eastern partners produced by the lack of a clear prospect for enlargement. The literature presents an extensive critique of EU's 'conditionality-light' (G. Sasse, 2008) approach – a diluted form of conditionality lacking firm commitments and rewards. The studies on the individual case of Moldova tend to ignore EU's perception and interests in this relationship and look exclusively at the consequences of EU's or the Moldovan government's actions. This literature contains the recurring argument that the EU's approach based on

conditionality and socialization is not efficient in the case of Moldova (Panaite, Jarabik 2009, Ghinea 2010, Popescu & Wilson 2009, Rodkiewicz 2009). Another segment of the literature specifically focused on the Moldovan case analyzes the reached levels of reform implementation and the government's actual commitment to the country's European vocation. There is also an emerging literature segment which looks into the impact on the European partnership of the political change Moldova is currently experiencing (Jarabik 2009, Ghinea 2009, Panaite 2008, Litra 2009, Minzarari 2008).

This paper is intended to complement the existing theoretical accounts of the EU-Moldova relations with an in-depth study focused on EU's interests and perspectives. This paper aims to provide an answer to the general, out of focus studies on the effectiveness of the EU in the area with a more detailed approach, addressing the specificities of the Moldovan case. The application of the capability-expectations model on this particular case reveals interesting insights on the proper evaluation of EU's expectations in its relations with the eastern partners. This paper also brings an answer to the existing literature on the Moldovan case, by presenting a different angle of analysis, based on the observation of the real EU's ambitions.

At a first glance, the EU-Moldova relationship suffers from a capability-expectations gap. The objectives guiding this relationship, as agreed upon in the European Neighbourhood Policy and in the Partnership Agreement signed with Moldova and later consolidated through the Eastern Partnership framework are very ambitious, aiming at a complete transformation of the partner country through its alignment to a set of European norms and values. Bearing in mind the high expectations created by these formally stated objectives; a significant segment of the aforementioned literature argues that the EU capabilities cannot match these commitments. In terms of the funding resources, the EU allocates a meagre budget for dealing with this country, insufficient for implementing the wide range of reforms formally agreed upon; in terms of the EU's cohesiveness as a actor, different member states seem to have diverging interests and levels of commitment to the area which lead to a potential cacophony of discourses; and in terms of actual presence, the EU developed an institutional capacity in the area late, and even after the opening of the European Commission delegation to Chişinău in October 2006 and the appointment of a European Union Special Representative to support the Transnistrian conflict resolution in March 2006, the lack of clear delimitation of mandates reflects a lack of clear purpose and careful planning. The capability-expectations gap is emphasized in the literature particularly in connection to the intentional lack of a medium term perspective for enlargement. In the case of Moldova and the republics of the former Soviet Union in general, the EU does not have the adequate instruments to

exert a real 'attraction force' because 'far too little is on offer, both to encourage democracy, economic reform [...] and to try to force governments to comply with political and economic conditions'. (Smith 2005b: 286). The author continues by stating that

'the policy instruments available to the EU are inadequate [...] Unless the EU can provide more resources to try to make up for the lack of a medium term membership prospect, it is unlikely to exercise much influence in the former Soviet Union.'(Smith 2005: 288).

Because of the mismatch between the level of expectations and the available capabilities, the argument follows, EU's policy towards Moldova is a failure.

This paper does not agree with this commonly held view. We will argue that the actual level of commitments is incorrectly assessed and that the objectives enshrined in the formal documents normalizing the relationship have to be read cautiously and confronted against the realities of EU's policy in the region. We will argue that the expectations for the EU-Moldova relationship are far less substantial and less comprehensive than it would appear from the existing official documentation, the EU being preoccupied mainly with stabilizing the region and ensuring its Eastern border security. The Union's main presence in the area has been focused on stabilizing Moldova's economy and producing growth and on the Transnistrian conflict, which was perceived by the EU as a good opportunity to consolidate its difficult relations with Russia. The approach adopted by the EU on its relations with Moldova is not independent from Moldova's understanding of this relationship. The parade character of the reforms conducted in Moldova in 2001-2009 and the low level of respect for the commitments made to its European partners encouraged a superficial EU involvement in the area. The expectations enshrined in the formal agreements between the two parties can be perceived as a framework for what could be obtained should there exist the necessary political will and determination from both parts. The EU responded with a low salience approach to an unconvincing EU oriented reform package. In this interpretation, there is no capability-expectations gap affecting the relationship. We will further argue that the objectives of the cooperation seem to have been upgraded since the 2009 change of regime, pointing at an increased level of political commitment from the Union to respond at higher expectations expressed by the Moldovan government. But even in these circumstances, the capabilities-expectations gap seems to elude the relationship, because the EU appears ready to match higher expectations with a solid political promise and increased material resources. The recent increased dialogue between Brussels and Chisinau and the many visits, declarations, memoirs and promises stand as an exemplification of the changing nature of the EU-Moldova relationship.

Variables affecting the EU-Moldova relationship

In order to support a better understanding of the evolution of the EU-Moldova relations, this chapter will present the features which lay the foundations of this relationship, categorized under three dimensions: economic, ideological and geostrategic. With the use of these three dimensions we will capture the most important aspects shaping the background of the EU-Moldova relations. The choice for these dimensions is informed by the extensive literature on the subject of EU foreign policy which analyzes the motivations driving EU's foreign policy. Generally, the literature on the subject weighs the relative importance of one dimension over the other in various attempts to theorize the presence of the EU in the international system. Such an objective eludes the scope of this paper, but we find nevertheless, that these criteria are a helpful tool in categorizing and comprehensively encapsulating the main features of EU's external actions, a salient point in our exposition of the dynamics of the EU-Moldova relationship.

The economic dimension

Moldova is one of the poorest countries in Europe, with the lowest GDP per capita in Europe, currently (2010) appreciated at 1,545 USD². In 2009, the European Parliament briefly described the economic situation of the country in the following terms:

'Moldova is the poorest country in Europe in terms of its GDP. About 1 in 4 adults work abroad supplying 40% of the country's GDP. Moldova is mainly agricultural, producing some renown wine. It imports all its gas.' (European Parliament 2009: 2)

In the early 2000s the country experienced a steady economic increase, with a minimum of 6% real GDP growth per year until the year 2006 when the trade embargo applied by Russia on Moldovan agricultural products and later on wines diminished the country's economic growth to 3% in 2007³. The 2009 economic downturn has had a profound negative impact on the economy of Moldova, producing an estimated 6.5% GDP decrease. Moldova's exports in 2009 dropped by more than 20% compared to the same period in 2008 and the imports fell by more than 30%.⁴ Unemployment rates

² International Monetary Fund statistics, available on-line at <http://www.imf.org>;

³ Data gathered from IMF databases, available at <http://www.imf.org>;

⁴ IDIS Viitorul, Monitorul economic. Analize si prognoze trimestriale, no 17 Trimestrul 3 (Chisinau 2009), p. 34-38, available at http://www.viitorul.org/public/2320/en/ME_17_ENG.pdf;

are rising, the number of Moldovan workers employed outside Moldova is not dropping, despite the optimism of the economic boost. But the regional economic recession produced a severe decrease in the revenue sent to Moldova.

*'It is well known that it was work migrants who contributed the most to the decrease of poverty and not the Government's policies. Therefore, reduction of money transfers from abroad increases the risk of considerable decline of internal demand.'*⁵

The economic situation of the separatist region of Transnistria is even more dire, currently experiencing a worse economic downturn than the Moldovan average performance.

Shifting trading patterns

In the last years, there has been a clear reorientation in the trading patterns of Moldova, with a substantial change of focus from Russia towards the EU. The EU consolidated its position as Moldova's largest trading partner, particularly after Romania's 2007 accession to the Union. From this perspective, the European policies seem to have been particularly efficient. In 2001, the exports trading volume with Russia was two times larger than the one with the EU, whereas in 2008 Moldova traded approximately three times more with the EU than with Russia.⁶ The EU is becoming an important partner even for Transnistria, which established strong economic relations with Germany (Popescu 2005: 20).

As we have seen the EU managed to encourage a constant trade surplus with Moldova, showing a clear success in the economic re-orientation of the country, but Russia managed nevertheless to secure particular strategic areas of economic dependency which enable it to 'use its economic muscle to gain political influence' (Popescu&Wilson 2009: 3). Because of the historically closer ties of the Transnistrian region with the Russian Federation and its leading role in the Soviet Union era, the main industrial activity of Moldova is concentrated in Transnistria, an area which has been in the last 18 years outside the reach of the central government (King 2000: 178-209). More than 40% of the industrial infrastructure and capacity of Moldova is concentrated in Transnistria, also one of the main producers of electricity in the country. Russia has enhanced economic relations with Transnistria in terms of trading volumes, but also business ownership. For example, the privatization of the Cuciurgan power plant located in Transnistria brought the power plant under the ownership

⁵ IDIS Viitorul, Monitorul economic. Analize si prognoze trimestriale, no 17 Trimestrul 3 (Chisinau 2009), p. 54, available at http://www.viitorul.org/public/2320/en/ME_17_ENG.pdf;

⁶ Ibid, p. 74, data provided by the National Bank of Moldova;

of the Russian state-owned company Inter RAO EES⁷. The company interrupted the electricity supply to Moldova in 2004 and 2005, a period of tense bilateral diplomatic relations between Moldova and Russia. (Popescu&Wilson 2009: 32)

Even if the Moldovan economy was substantially redirected towards building partnerships with the EU, Russia still can and does exercise a deep influence on Moldova's economy. For example, after Moldova rejected the Kozak memorandum⁸, crafted by the Russian Federation in 2003 as a solution to the Transnistrian conflict, and decided to ask for more support from the EU for finding a resolution to the issue, Russia imposed an embargo on Moldovan agricultural and wine exports. These sanctions had a dramatic effect on the Moldovan economy, as Russia was Moldova's main wine trading partner, receiving over a third of the Moldovan total exports trading flow. These sanctions were complemented by doubling gas prices and by establishing that Moldova had to pay for the gas debts accumulated by Transnistria (Rodkiewicz 2009: 68-70). The economic blockade on Moldova wines was lifted after the Transnistrian 'referendum for independence' and in the eve of the Transnistrian 'presidential elections' (Dura 2007: 2), further proving the foreign policy implications of Russia's economic policy. Even now, Moldova is highly reliant on Russian energy commodities and some sectors of its export trading are still susceptible to Russian economic pressure. At the time of this research, Moldova experiences a wine embargo started in June 2010, which will incur substantial medium-term costs to the Moldovan economy, since the Russian Federation is still the largest importer of Moldovan wines⁹. Nevertheless, the long-term implications of these severe fluctuations in the Moldova-Russian Federation trading relations could be beneficial, by 'encouraging the producers to align to the European quality requirements, enabling a reorientation of the market'¹⁰. Moldovan specialists are currently negotiating with Brussels the expansion of the allowed trading volumes under the current Trade Agreement scheme. 'From this angle, the current crisis is a chance to consolidate our relations with the EU'¹¹.

Security implications and financial aid

Since the EU is now directly bordering Moldova, the country's state of economic development is of increasing importance to the Union. As the 2003 European Security Strategy states, a secure

⁷ The Moldovan press expressed concerns about the legality and the hidden agenda of this privatization; see for example 'What is the Price of Cheap Electricity Produced by Cuciurgan Power Plant?', Ion Preasca, 2010, writing for 'Moldova azi';

⁸ The Kozak memorandum was deemed unacceptable by the Moldovan government because it proposed that Moldova should become a Russian protectorate, thus legitimizing the permanent presence of Russian military forces on the ground (Panaite : 40);

⁹ Interview with the Andrei Popov, Moldovan deputy foreign minister for Europa Liberă;

¹⁰ Interview with MFAIE official;

¹¹ Ibid;

neighbourhood represents one of the three strategic interests of the EU. After the end of the Cold War, the EU began a process of 're-prioritization of its security agenda' by focusing on crime spillover from the borders in the form of transnational organized crime, illegal immigration, human and drug traffic and refugee issues (Wyn Rees:208). The EU has constantly expressed its belief that economic integration, economic growth and stabilization, coupled with direct aid and political dialogue should be the leading instruments for securing the neighbourhood.

In its interactions with Moldova, the EU emphasizes on the security concerns which would be addressed through closer bilateral relations. The opening paragraph of the European Commission communication on the Eastern Partnership mentions that:

'The European Union has a vital interest in seeing stability, better governance and economic development at its east borders.' (European Commission 2008: 2)

The same message focused on the Union's security-related self interests emerges from Ferrero-Waldner's presentation of the EaP:

'All that the Commission is proposing to the Members States is in the interest of our citizens. This is not philanthropy. It is 21st century European foreign policy.'(Ferrero-Waldner, B. 2009: 1)

The message that the involvement of the EU in the eastern neighbourhood markets is informed by political and strategic interests could not be clearer. It is from this perspective that we also perceive the European financial aid given to Moldova. After the 2005 Russian economic blockades, the EU decided to double its financial aid package for Moldova to 254 million Euros for the 2007-2010 period, making Moldova the country with the second biggest per capita allowance in the ENP after Israel (Dura 2007: 3). The EU remains by far Moldova's most generous donor. Furthermore, Moldova receives considerable financial aid from some Member States, particularly Sweden, the United Kingdom and Denmark; Romania recently joined this group but with a far less substantial contribution. The literature estimates that the cumulative EU and Member States donation to Moldova reaches around 90 million Euros annually, with the prospects of a sizeable increase in the coming future (Ghinea& Panaite 2009: 127).

The Russian Federation is also an important donor, but more so because of the critical moments when it chooses to award support or the active politicisation of these acts, rather than the aid amounts. For instance, Russia is an important donor for Transnistria. In 2006, Russia contributed to the Transnistrian finances with \$ 77 million, a substantial amount for the half a million inhabitants (Dura 2007: 2). Moreover, Russia provides Transnistria with unconditional market access, free

energy and military and political support in the regional conflict. The timing for offering support to Moldova proves to be sometimes critical, producing immediate awareness and popularity. For instance, after the April 2009 Chisinau revolts, president Voronin returned from Moscow with a promise for a 500 million USD help fund for the near future and with 20 million USD for the reconstruction of the devastated Parliament building (Jarabik 2009: 2).

The ideological dimension

Most of the former soviet countries of Europe face dramatic identity and cultural belongingness problems, having undergone numerous and opposing nation-building projects in a quite short period of time, but Moldova is most probably one of the most difficult cases (King 2000: 228). The region constantly oscillated between two opposing points of attraction and two corresponding sets of values – Russia and Romania, the representatives of the East and the West – and segments of the geographical area have had different levels of affiliation to the two poles. This produced internal disputes within the Moldovan society, based on ethnical, class, age, geographical positioning dividing lines, which are still present. After numerous strongly diverging identity engineering programs, building a Moldovan national turned out to be a failure because none of the attempts was serious (King 2000: 229). Consequently, Moldova is the only country in Eastern Europe where twenty years after independence ‘major disputes exist among political and cultural elites over the fundamentals of national identity’ (King 2000: 229).

The 2009 April parliamentary elections proved once more the actuality of the old divisive lines splitting the Moldovan society. The elections showed that the Moldovan electorate responds to two opposing models of political power, accepts two diverging national identities and supports two competing geopolitical orientations (Rodkiewicz 2009: 45). In the context of the April 2009 uprising, president Voronin launched an aggressive critique against the opposition parties, which were accused of conspiracy against the statehood stability of Moldova and pursuing union with Romania, complemented by a strong rhetoric against Romania, accused of orchestrating the *coup d'état* against the Communist Party (Jarabik 2009: 2).

Nevertheless, Moldova is currently the only country in the Eastern neighbourhood with a clear public support for EU integration; the opinion polls show a steady and healthy majority in support of EU accession.¹² But given the instability and the multipolarity of the Moldovan identity, the powerful

¹² 60 to 70% of the population supports EU accession; the figures in the literature were confirmed by an interview with a MFAIE official;

external pressures and the strongly embedded dividing lines among its society, there are no clear guarantees for the longevity of the pro-European general attitude¹³. Georgia is a living example of how sudden and deep political and ideological reorientations can occur in the Eastern neighbourhood.

The Transnistrian conflict offers another good example of the force of the dividing lines affecting the Moldovan society. This conflict is not as much one between two ethnicities, as it is one between two ideological and geostrategic affiliation systems; even if the proportion of Russians in Transnistria is higher because of the region's history in the MASSR republic, the river Dniester demarcating Transnistria from the rest of Moldova is not a separation line between two different peoples (King 2000). In a very simplified interpretation, this conflict appeared because of the growing differences between the aspirations of the newly independent Republic of Moldova and those of a region which had been granted until that moment a special status, as the leaders of the socialist integration program in Moldova and refused to abandon the privileges.

It seems that the common values approach developed by the European Union for establishing relations with its neighbourhood is sustainable in Moldova only to a limited degree. There is a strong public support for EU integration, but the extent to which this choice is based on common values and not just on the hope for better living standards is contestable.

Moldova is a special case among the countries of the former Soviet Union, since it is the only one which emerged as a genuine democracy after independence in 1991. Its democratic credentials were lowered in the recent past¹⁴, starting with the 2001 elections when the Communist Party took the lead of the country. In the period 2001 – 2009 Moldova and the EU forged closer economic relations and intensified their dialogue, but the values support which supposedly was meant to represent the foundation of this relationship deteriorated significantly. This is one more reason to question the assumption that the current pro-Western affiliation is a stable choice based on a shared set of norms and values constituting the Moldovan identity. Moreover, the 'rhetorical entrapment' (Shimmelfennig 2003) argument cannot be employed by the Moldovan elite in order to deepen the relations with the EU since any claim on the normative foundation guiding the rapprochement to Europe is prone to raise suspicions.

¹³ For example a 2007 study showed that more than 60% of the population was in favour of a single-party system (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007: 95);

¹⁴ Most of the evaluation reports of the EU-Moldova Action Plan indicate this trend;

The geopolitical dimension

As we have seen from previous points of analysis, Moldova occupies an uncertain position oscillating between two points of reference: the EU and the Russian Federation. The strong economic ties, the cultural bond, the active involvement of the Russian Federation in local Moldovan politics are manifestation of the geostrategic interests it has in the region. Although the three parts – Moldova, the Russian Federation and the EU – have tried to develop good bilateral relationships, the interests of Russia and the EU in the area of Moldova are for the most part incompatible and cause uncomfortable tensions between the partners (Rodkiewicz 2009: 66). The previous analysis has provided numerous examples in which the EU and Russia exercise different powers of attraction leading Moldova in different directions. The developing partnership between the EU and Russia is already a complicated matter, which seems to be lacking a clear resolution, which attracts a wide variety of reactions from different Member States and which for the time being seems to be postponed without any signs of clear progress.

The Transnistrian debacle

The feeble intervention of the EU in the Transnistrian conflict stands as a proof of the precautionary action the Union takes vis á vis Moldova when Russian geopolitical interests are at work. The Russian military presence in the area under the pretext of a peacekeeping operation complicates the implications of EU's actions towards Transnistria,

'(preventing) the EU from taking a more active stand in the settlement of the conflict. This is due to the special relationship the EU is building with Russia' (Panaite 2006: 41)

The EU has tried to avoid direct involvement in the settlement of the conflict; its actions are limited to appointing a Special Representative to Moldova with a special mandate in conflict resolution, institute a visa ban on the leaders of the separatist movement and opening a EU Border Assistance Mission in 2005. The Moldovan political elites have repeatedly asked for deeper European involvement in the conflict resolution process. Moldovan authorities have demanded for EU participation in a stabilization intervention to replace the Russian peacekeeping force and later assist with civil and military observers (Panaite 2006: 45). The literature goes even further by suggesting that in order to be effective in settling the Transnistrian conflict, 'the use of ESDP civilian capabilities in Moldova under the guidance of the EU Special Representative would be crucial'(Popescu 2005: 38). Most recently on the 15 May 2010, Prime Minister Filat appealed to the European Union through an *aide-memoire*, asking for a stronger engagement of the EU in the solving of the

Transnistrian conflict¹⁵. The answer from Katherine Ashton on behalf of the European Union was a positive one, stressing on the need for stronger cooperation. The Moldovan government is currently waiting for factual EU engagement.¹⁶

Avoiding geopolitical hindrances

There is a clear focus in the diplomatic discourse of all the involved parties on forging friendly and durable partnerships. Problems arise only in the form of a clash between EU's and Russia's strategic interests in Moldova. Some authors hold that the diverging interests in the area are intractable, since the Russian Federation has always shown support for the Communist Party, for which 'the EU represents an alien habitat' (Minzarari 2008: 15). Also, on various occasions, Russian officials have pointed out blatantly that the deepening of Moldova's commitment to the European Union may produce a drop of temperature in the Russian alliance with Moldova.¹⁷ However, the actual situation is not as dramatic; since 2009 the government decided to engage more deeply in the relations with the EU and promote as convincingly as possible a deep cooperation with the final objective of accession. The government's performances this far and their stated objectives show a departure from the previous dual Moldovan foreign policy which was playing one partner for the other, according to short-term interests. The Moldovan government is trying to separate its efforts to reform from the geopolitical implication of the country's difficult geopolitical positioning.

A clear attempt of avoiding the geopolitical hindrances is the Moldovan government's claim for the inclusion of the country in the Western Balkans negotiation package. The Romanian government, a strong partner for Moldova, lobbying for its European vocation, also supports the view that the country should be grouped together with the WB countries (Dura 2007: 2). Geographically, the claim makes no sense, but the logic behind this rhetoric is geopolitical and aims at separating Moldova from Russia's interests in the mental map of Brussels decision-makers.

'speaking about including Moldova in the Balkans package means granting it even a remote membership perspective, based on its merits and not conditioned on other geostrategic considerations.' (Ghinea & Chirila 2010: 6)

Overall, from the assessment of the factors influencing the EU-Moldova relationship, we can observe that the EU's approach towards the partner country has been timid, limited to low levels of

¹⁵ Press release, unpublished, obtained with the courtesy of a MAEIE official;

¹⁶ Interview with MFAIE official;

¹⁷ Andrei Kojoshin, chairman of Russian State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs declared in 2005 that 'If Moldova continues to count on the integration in the EU institutions, it will risk its status of strategic partner with Russia'(Minzarari 2008: 23);

intervention and support. We have also seen that the Russian interests in the area and the EU's overly cautious handling of this aspect make the Union's commitments to Moldova even feeble. On the other hand, we have seen that the Moldovan government has practiced a dual foreign policy, oscillating between its two partners and generally with no serious commitment. The next chapter will match these results, focusing on particular milestones in the formal development of the EU-Moldova relations, and fitting them into the capability-expectations gap model.

Bridging the gap – low expectations met with little capabilities

In this chapter we will use the proofs of the previous analysis in order to disprove the existence of a capability-expectations gap in the EU-Moldova relations and to trace the evolutionary trends of this relation. The manifestations and the effects of the afore mentioned variables will be used in the following analysis, focusing on the milestones of the relationship: the ENP and the resulting Action Plan, the Eastern Partnership initiative, the 2009 elections and the Association Agreement currently under negotiations. In all of these instances we will explore the EU and the Moldovan expectations for European action and then confront those to the resources and the efficiency of the European interventions.

External recognition of actorness

As previously mentioned, Hill notes the importance of outsiders' recognition of the EU as a unified, integral and autonomous actor in the international relations system, an important feature for assessing the level of EU actorness in its foreign policy actions (Hill 1993).

In the EU-Moldova relationship one aspect has been constant since the late 1990s: the continued recognition of the EU as an individual actor with which Moldova was willing to interact via its foreign policy instruments. Moldova regards the EU as a powerful actor; its demands for interaction are addressed to the EU and not to the Member States (Smith 2005b). Moldova's golden objective is acknowledgment by the European Institutions and finally full membership with participation in the institutional structures of the Union, and not multi or bi-lateral relations with the Member States. This is not to say that Moldova is not interested in building stronger relations with the Member

States on the basis of bilateral agreements. The Moldovan authorities stress in their discourse on the importance of the assistance received from some Member States and cherish the enhanced relationships with 'its circle of friends'¹⁸. But Moldova sees these relations as a very important step on the road towards higher purposes: European integration. The Moldova's main partner continues to be the EU, and the Member States complement the international relations of Moldova but do not represent a desirable substitute for the relationship with the Union.

In sum, we observe that Moldova treats the European Union as an independent actor in the international scene, with an individualised volition and with individual objectives and tactics, rather than the sum of its parts. In the case of Moldova, we can see that this aspect of the capability-expectations gap is resolved.

The ENP and the EUMAP

In 1994, Moldova signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, entered into force in 1998. The document gave legal grounding to the relations between the two parties on a period of ten years. This type of agreement was made available to all the former Soviet republics and entailed limited obligations and benefits for the parties involved. Moldova approached the PCA enthusiastically, being one of the first countries to sign this document (Panaite 2006: 27). The objectives specified in the document are very vague and reflect a shallow level of commitment from both signatories. The document was designed to offer a legal framework open to later interpretations and more concise future objectives. There are no quantifiable demands or any palpable recompenses; the wording of the PCA objectives is kept as vague as possible. For instance one of the objectives reads as follows:

'to provide an appropriate framework for the political dialogue between the Parties allowing the development of political relations.' (EC 1994: 5)

A substantial change to the EU-Moldova relations was brought with the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004, which also included the Republic of Moldova. This new policy emerged as the EU's response to the challenges of the 'big bang enlargement', by presenting an innovative response – an 'everything but institutions' form of integration. The Commission President Prodi described the Union's approach to these countries as 'more than partnership and less than membership' (Prodi 2002: 5). The objectives of the ENP were broad and very ambitious, including

¹⁸ This group includes Poland, Romania, Finland, Sweden, Hungary, Bulgaria and some of the Baltic Members;

the containment of security concerns at the European border, political stability, avoiding the emergence of new inclusion/exclusion borders and define an attractive alternative to EU membership (Sasse 2008: 295-6) on the basis of shared values. The ENP approach suggested an emphasis 'on developing close relations and becoming *like us* but not actually *of us*.' (Browning & Christou 2010: 113)

The ENP was implemented in the neighbouring countries through Action Plans, individually crafted for each of the partner states. The EUMAP was drafted in May 2004 and adopted in February 2005 for a period of three years and with the possibility of further extensions. The EUMAP set out an extensive number of ambitious objectives formulated as priorities for action, such as working towards a resolution to the Transnistrian conflict, strengthening the functioning of democratic institution, consolidating the rule of law and the freedom of the press, improving the business environment, progress in the fight against corruption (EC 2005: 4). The list of demands was complemented by a list of incentives, promising deeper economic integration, the prospect of opening a visa liberalization dialogue, stronger political cooperation and financial assistance. Taking into consideration the long 'to do' list, there appears to be, *prima facie* a mismatch between the objectives of the partnership and the resources to attain them. The literature portrays this mismatch as a typical example of EU's capability-expectations gap. Smith concludes that 'it is hard to see how these action plans provide a real incentive for reform' (Smith 2005a: 764). The objections raised against the Action Plans in general and the EUMAP in particular were that at times, it was not very clear who had to undergo the actions required for the attainment of objectives, there were no clear quantifiers to measure the implementation level of the objectives, the schedule for reforms was very lax and did not include strict deadlines, which reflected a very loose conditionality framework. Moreover, the self-interest of the EU transpired as the main rationale of the AP (Smith 2005a: 765, Sasse 2008: 302). The literature argues that the ENP approach as 'politics of the half-open door' was not credible or strong enough to produce the desired outcomes. The 'conditionality-light' (Sasse 2008) – conditionality without firm commitments and rewards – approach of the EU to the neighbouring countries was deemed as inefficient and as an instance of the Union's incapacity to address the expectations raised by the third parties and by itself with suitable and commensurate instruments.

We propose a different interpretation on the vague phrasing of the EUMAP. EU's expectations with regard to its relation with Moldova are not equivalent with the ambitious priorities for actions. Rather we see the formally stated objectives of the EUMAP as a framework which describes the maximal level of cooperation. We subscribe to Sasse's view who argues that 'the ENP's vague

incentive structure make the ENP country's governments, rather than the EU the motor of change' (Sasse 2008: 298). The real self-expectations of the EU in the area are very limited and restricted to the 2003 ESS interpretation of EU's interests in the area: making the Eastern neighbourhood a secure and contained area by contributing to the economic stability of the area and by maintaining a good level of political dialogue. After the institutional blockade of the 2005 referendum and the enlargement fatigue following the 2004/2007 wave, the EU seems less enthusiastic about making maximal offers, setting on civilizing missions and assuming the leading role in consolidating Moldovan democracy. Prodi's discourse seems clear about this approach: 'The EU hopes to provide an opportunity for the reform-minded forces to use the Action Plan objectives to put items on the agenda and promote change'. It is, therefore, up to the Moldovan elites to set the level of cooperation with the EU; the Union will only show its inclination towards dialogue, but the level of political commitment depends entirely on the seriousness of the Moldovan government. The EUMAP stipulated in the introduction section that:

'the level of ambition of the relationship will depend on the degree of Moldova's commitment to common values as well as its capacity to implement jointly agreed priorities'

Our interpretation on the limited expectations of the Union in the area is supported by our findings presented in the previous chapter. The EU-Moldova relation has been most successful in its economic dimension, where the EU had the necessary instruments. As early as 2006, Moldova started benefiting from a GSP+ trading preference system, which entails an asymmetric preference system with free access to the Single Market for an extensive group of products (Panaite 2006: 30). Most authors consider that the lack of a membership perspective is one more piece of evidence for the capability-expectation gap, further diminishing the chances of a successful policy in Moldova (Panaite 2006). We interpret the lack of 'the golden carrot' as an affirmation of the Union's interests in Moldova i.e. consolidating EU's security at the borders. These interpretations are consistent with the implementation results of the EUMAP as we shall further explore.

After the first three years of the EUMAP, most of the reports on its implementation results were unfavourable. With the exception of the Moldovan government report (issued when the Communist Party of Moldova was still governing), most independent reports pointed to the shallow implementation of the plan. Out of the ten priorities for action, only two were successfully implemented – the creation of country of origin certification and the readmission agreement (Rodkiewicz 2009: 73). Significant progress was reported on the economic dimension of the partnership, whereas in the field of the consolidations of democratic institutions, justice,

improvement of the business environment, freedom of speech and freedom of the media most of the reports signal a lowering of standards as compared to the 2005 status (Bușcăneanu 2008). As we have seen in the previous analysis on the Transnistrian conundrum, while not ignoring the conflict, the EU has taken a relatively distant stance. The EUMAP was criticized for lacking vigour and adequate instruments for crisis management (Panaite 2006), focusing instead on crisis prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation. This approach matches our suggested interpretation of EU's interests in the area – limited commitment in response to limited ambitions. For the European officials, the Transnistrian conflict was the easiest frozen conflict in the area, offering a chance to consolidate closer relations with Russia (Ghinea&Panaite 2009:126). We can see from this analysis that the EU was successful in the areas which were part of its strategic interests – promoting economic growth and securing the borders, and that the Moldovan authorities were not very willing to promote a deep reform in the political and societal areas, where values and norms come into play.

The expectations of the Moldovan government

As we mentioned, the capability-expectations analysis also includes the partner's expectations from their relationship with the EU. We have previously covered the issues of perceptions of actorness, we will now focus on the Moldovan objectives in the partnership with the EU.

Since 2001, the government of Moldova has constantly affirmed their affinity towards the European Union, stating that European integration represents a strategic interest. There are, however, justified doubts about the seriousness of these claims. As we have shown, despite the identity confusion of the Moldovan society, a firm pro-European support has been constantly displayed by the electorate. Playing the European card both in the 2001 and 2005 elections brought supplementary electoral support to the CPM (Ghinea&Panaite 2009, Minzarari 2009), but this doesn't necessarily mean that the insistent requests for a membership perspective represented an authentic goal of the Communist ruling elite. We support the view held by Minzarari that

'influential politicians in Chisinau perfectly understood that they cannot be granted such a perspective and forced their request for the sake of public show, presenting themselves as pro-Europeans.' (Minzarari 2009: 28)

The varying discourse of political elites in Chișinău, oscillating from pro-European frenetic support to seeking help from the Russian allies is a clear display of their limited commitment to the EU. More pragmatically, we can see from the implementation records of the EUMAP that the Moldovan

government willingly avoided implementing reform packages in critical areas such as justice, democracy and freedom of the press, where internal political interests were at stake. The literature on the EUMAP points to a blatant discrepancy between the formally adopted legislation and its actual implementation (Ghinea&Panaite 2009, Minzarari 2009 and others). The 2008 Global Integrity Index on Moldova shows a ‘huge’ implementation gap between the legal framework – here Moldova scores 88% - and actual implementation of the legislation – the score is here 44%¹⁹. In February 2008, the Parliament adopted a new legislation on the freedom of assembly which was ignored later in April 2009 (Ghinea&Panaite 2009: 103). When the Communist governance was confronted with this criticism, the response was that the AP did not mention clear benchmarks for the assessment of reforms in these fields and that ‘what really mattered for the Moldovan European Integration efforts was to create the necessary legal framework’ (Minzarari 2009: 29)²⁰. We find that these arguments are convincing enough to allow us to conclude that the Moldovan elite was comfortable with the ‘everything but institutions’ approach, which permitted extensive economic cooperation and limited political and social reform. These findings further support our argument that the EU-Moldova relation as codified through the EUMAP does not suffer from a capability-expectations gap.

The Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership appeared following a Swedish-Polish proposal in 2008 which called for a differentiation of the six Eastern Neighbouring countries from the rest of the ENP partners. The EaP is addressed to Armenia, Azerbaidjan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and is meant to

‘create the necessary conditions to accelerate the political association and further economic integration between the EU and interested partners’ (Council of the EU 2009: 6)

The EaP shows a similar approach with the ENP, with limited European policial ambitions and stressing on the responsibility of the partner countries to deepen the cooperation with the Union. The opening of the Commission Proposal stresses on the vital security interest the Union holds in the area. The Eastern Partnership offers instruments for deeper cooperation with the Eastern neighbours, should they show their inclination towards consolidating their relationships with the Union. It is clear that Ukraine and Moldova form a separate group among the EaP countries, as these

¹⁹ Data available on-line at <http://report.globalintegrity.org/Moldova/2008/>;

²⁰ Based on the declarations of Vlaseslav Dobanda, head of the European Integration Department of MFAIE;

two countries have the capabilities and the desire to cooperate more intensively with the EU (Ghinea&Chirila 2010: 7). The maximal incentives of the EaP are the creation of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas and initiate a visa liberalization dialogue. On the political commitment side, the EaP avoids any reference to the prospect of membership. Moreover, the countries were downgraded from *European countries* to *partner countries*, so as to avoid even the remotest promise on comprehensive integration. Angela Merkel was the only representative of the six major EU Member States to attend to the May 2009 Prague Summit, when the EaP was launched, a clear indication of the fact that the EU had other political priorities (Popescu&Willson 2009: 12).

The real objectives of the Union seem very similar to the ones of the APs, the EU seems interested in the stability of the region in the view of its security concerns and shows little interest in a deep political dialogue with the six. The instruments offered for delivering these results are adequate and proportional to its interests. The Moldovan interests before the April 2009 elections seemed unchanged: a deep and comprehensive reform of the state structures would threaten the political survival of the Communist elite. This was further proven by Voronin's reaction to the EU criticism in the context of the 2009 elections, which were completely ignored.

The 2009 elections: a vivid example of limited expectation from both partners

The April 2009 Parliament elections are a good example to show the limited political expectations of the both parties involved in this relationship. The Communist victory in the elections was contested by the opposition, raising suspicions on the fairness of the electoral practices, followed by public protests and violence. Before the elections, the EU had insisted several times on the importance of this moment in the evolution of the EU-Moldova relations (Ghinea&Panaite 2009: 104). For example, the fact that the EU postponed the negotiations of the Association Agreement for early 2010, supports our understanding that the elections were seen as an important point in the development of the relationship, holding the potential for a substantial upgrade (Panaite 2008, Litra 2010). Nevertheless, the Communist leadership ignored completely these signs and announced a sudden change to the Elections Code, which would minimize the opposition's chances of success. Moreover, the leaders of the opposition were charged in that period with fabricated trials. It is clear from these actions that the Communist leadership was much more interested in political survival rather than aligning to the EU's requirements for an open democracy. On the night of the 7 April, the police intervened to stop the protesters with a disproportionate and violent reprisal – hundreds were illegally detained any many protesters were beaten (Rodkiewicz 2009: 61).

EU's reaction was late and feeble. The EUSR was more focused on the Transnistrian conflict, and the evolution of the events seemed to have taken by surprise the EU officials (Ghinea&Panaite 2009: 115). However, this seems unlikely, considering the importance the very same European officials put on the conduct and the outcomes of the elections. The European Parliament was very slow to condemn the violent reprisal of the manifestation; the Council expressed its concerns on the human rights violations only in June and called for an independent investigation. The response of Vladimir Voronin supports the interpretation we have given so far to the Moldovan expectations from the European partnership: the president ignored the requests of the European Institutions and blatantly accused Romania for orchestrating a coup d'état with the objective of destabilizing Moldova's statehood. EU's ambivalence on its relations with Moldova was made even clearer in the following events. After the second round of elections, the Communists were short of one vote in order to elect the president. The EUSR, Kalman Miszei, lobbied the opposition to award the Communists the golden vote for the sake of stability. This is one more instance which proves that the Union 'cared more about stability, rather than about supporting the agenda of democratization' (Rodkiwicz 2009: 72).

We have seen through this example that the expectations of both involved parties are very limited, trying to keep each other at a comfortable distance. Under this interpretation, the EU-Moldova relation is not affected by a capability-expectations gap, since the Union's instruments are adequate to its interests and to the expectations of its partners.

The new governing alliance and the Association Agreement

2009 has been a year of dramatic changes for the EU-Moldova relations. The brief evolution of the European Integration Alliance, the new governing alliance, prevents us from making bold statements on the changes in the EU-Moldova interaction patterns. Nevertheless, the intensive diplomatic activity in Chisinau, the frequent visits of Moldovan officials in Brussels and the rapidity with which this relationship is currently evolving suggest that both partners have increased their expectations. In the 1999-2009 period, Javier Solana visited Moldova twice; since January 2010, Moldova started the negotiations of three important policy frameworks with the EU. In January 2010, Moldova started negotiating a new Association Agreement, which will provide a new legal framework and new ambitious objectives for its relationship with the Union. The Association Agreement will include clear steps for the set-up of a DCFTA and probably a roadmap for the visa liberalization process. On

the 15 June 2010, Moldova initiated a dialogue on visa liberalization. The negotiating rhythm this far allows for optimism:

*'The prospects for finalizing the negotiations of the AA are promising. Two of the four chapters of negotiations are drawing to a close - contacts between people and the political dimension.'*²¹

Moldova is currently taking a pro-active approach on its relations with the EU, for instance in the case of visa liberalization where Moldova is using the example of the Western Balkans and started the reform process before the debut of the negotiations with the EU. Vladimir Filat summarized briefly but convincingly this approach:

'we are not in the position to wait for green light. We are ready to provoke such signals'
(Ghinea&Chirila 2010: 8)

²¹ Interview with MFAEI official;

Conclusion

This study set out to analyze the EU-Moldova relation with a particular focus on the Union's levels of interest and commitment in the area. We used the capability-expectations gap theory as a tool to guide our research. This paper has proven that, contrary to the commonly held view, EU's presence in Moldova is effective, and proportional to its objectives. We have drawn attention to the fact that the general objectives of the ENP, the Action Plans and the Eastern Partnership priorities for action do not represent the self-expectations of the Union. The key documents codifying EU's relations with Moldova only set the maximal objectives to be explored during their cooperation, should there be enough political will from the Moldovan elites. We provided arguments to show that the objectives of the EU are limited to keeping a stable regime at its periphery and to secure its borders. The Moldovan governance is also quite comfortable with the Union's 'conditionality-light' approach, which does not entail strong demands and clear benchmarks for assessing progress. In this interpretation, the expectations enshrined in the EU-Moldova relations are relatively low, focusing primarily on economic stabilization and growth and the promotion of a stable governance architecture. Under these circumstances, the capabilities which the EU controls and uses in the context of this relationship are proportionate and adequate to its purposes.

The interaction trend between the two partners seems to have changed since the Alliance for European Integration took power in 2009, after an eight year long Communist governance. The changes in the Moldovan political landscape are very recent and do not allow for daring conclusions, but it is still clear that the commitment levels of both partners have been upgraded. Both parties have adopted a more pro-active stance towards each other. We can observe that after the 2009 elections the Union is approaching the partner country with more ambitious objectives and that the Moldovan government is ready to undertake the reforms necessary to prove its genuine embracement of the country's European vocation. The Moldovan governance declares that the objective of European integration will shape the internal and external actions of the country (2009 Governance Programme). So far, the signals coming from both partners indicate a significant upgrading of the relationship to which the EU is ready to respond with appropriate and commensurate instruments, indicating that there is still no capability-expectations gap in EU's approach to Moldova.

Should the two partners commit to their relationship, Moldova could emerge as the success story of the EaP. The country has had relatively good democratic credentials, compared to the other Eastern

neighbouring countries, but probably the most important advantage is that Moldova remains the only country in the area where there is a healthy majority supporting European integration. The chances for success are high and the implications of a potential failure are disastrous for Moldova, which would further sink into isolation, and bad for the Union. We have seen that for the time being, the Moldovan government has a pro-active approach in its relation with the EU and does not require further promises to step up the reform rhythm. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the foundations of the country's pro-European orientation do not rest on solid grounds. Moldova, at this time more than ever, has a volatile political structure. The EU might need, therefore, to put its best foot forward and try to support the efforts of the current governance in order to maintain a devoted partner.

This research also has some broader implications for the academic study of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This study is an exemplification of how an in-depth unit-level focus can expose the discrepancies between the official discourse and the real ambitions invested in a EU-neighbouring country relations; in our case revealing that, contrary to the generally held position, there is no capability-expectations gap in EU's actions in Moldova. The objectives of the ENP are broad, but so is the policy's coverage; a high level of ambiguity comes naturally. Therefore, we have to look deeper for the real ambitions of the relationship, past the formal objectives of the ENP and the APs which serve just as maximal frameworks. The motors of the ENP are the partner countries, therefore unit-level studies are required as there is enough diversity in the ENP countries group (and the EaP group as well) to supply with surprises and pathological patterns of evolution.

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