
Moldova's National Minorities: Why are they Euroskeptical?



**Marcin Kosienkowski
William Schreiber**

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IFRI

27 RUE DE LA PROCESSION
75740 PARIS CEDEX 15 – FRANCE
TEL. : 33 (0)1 40 61 60 00
FAX : 33 (0)1 40 61 60 60
E-MAIL : ifri@ifri.org

IFRI-Bruxelles

RUE MARIE-THERESE, 21
1000 BRUXELLES, BELGIQUE
TEL. : 32(2) 238 51 10
FAX : 32 (2) 238 51 15
E-MAIL : bruxelles@ifri.org

WEBSITE : www.ifri.org

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Author

Marcin Kosienkowski, PhD, is an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science and International Affairs of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. William Schreiber is a Coca-Cola World Fund Fellow at Yale University. They are co-editors of *Moldova: Arena of International Influences* (Lexington Books, 2012) and the forthcoming *Digital Eastern Europe* (College of Eastern Europe, 2014).

Contents

ABSTRACT	4
INTRODUCTION	5
REASONS FOR NATIONAL MINORITIES' EUROSKEPTICISM.....	8
Ideological and public information factors.....	8
Economic and political factors.....	10
Social factors.....	12
PROSPECTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	15
What can be expected from Moldova's national minorities?	15
What can be done to win over the national minorities?.....	17
CONCLUSION.....	20

Abstract

Following the 2014 separatist conflict in Ukraine, observers have worried about the potential for a similar conflict in Moldova that would interrupt the country's EU association. Indeed, Moldova's national minorities largely oppose the country's process of approximation and integration with the European Union. National minorities are concentrated in the country's provincial regions. While they are comprised of diverse ethnic backgrounds, a majority are Russian-speaking and prefer close ties to the Russian Federation. This paper argues that the roots of Euroskeptic and even separatist rhetoric among national minorities can be explained by several factors, including center/regional tension and the political entrepreneurship of regional elites more concerned with local socioeconomics than international geopolitics.

Introduction

Moldova has been steadily and successfully advancing its European integration since the pro-European coalition unseated the Party of Communists and came to power in 2009. Moldova has even been called the front-runner of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), a program that aims to assist six states in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus in converging and integrating with the EU. The most recent and significant achievements by Moldova are visa-free travel to the EU for its citizens since 28 April 2014 and the signing of an Association Agreement (AA), including an agreement on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) on 27 June 2014.¹

Crucially, and with the help of the EU, the government has managed to persevere in its European course, despite a series of external and internal challenges.² First, it withstood Russian pressure to keep Moldova in its sphere of influence. Moscow imposed an embargo on Moldovan goods such as wine and agricultural products. It warned that it could cut off gas deliveries and hinted that Russia's numerous Moldovan migrant workers could be expelled. Moscow also used the Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria to destabilize the situation in Moldova. The covert Russian military aggression in neighboring Ukraine—which began in winter 2014 when the Euromaidan movement, explicitly pro-EU in its origins, ousted former President Viktor Yanukovich—negatively affected Moldovan perceptions of national security. Second, internal conditions were unfavorable too. The country faced political crises, the Moldovan parliament was unable to elect a president for 2.5 years, and tensions in a divided coalition were frequent. Finally, public support for EU integration decreased gradually: from 62.9% in November 2009

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¹ The European Union describes the AA as an agreement focusing on support for core reforms, and on economic recovery and growth, governance and sectorial cooperation. This includes the DCFTA, a free trade area covering both goods and services—and involving a high degree of regulatory approximation.

² F. Parmentier, "Moldova", *The Geopolitics of Eurasian Economic Integration*, LSE IDEAS Special Report 19, LSE, 2014, <www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR019/SR019-Parmentier.pdf>.

S. Secieru, "Moldova on the Path to Europe: not Yet Irreversible", *European View* 13, No. 1, 2014.

to 44% in April 2014.³ One of Moldova's most Euroskeptic groups is its national minorities.

According to the 2004 census of territory under control of the central authorities (excluding Transnistria), Moldovans and Romanians constitute 78% of Moldova's population. Among the remaining 22% are Ukrainians (8.4%), Russians (5.9%), Gagauzians (4.4%), Bulgarians (1.9%), and others (1.4%). Importantly, these minorities are concentrated in specific regions of the country. Turkic-speaking Gagauzians live largely in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in the south. Ethnic Bulgarians are concentrated in the nearby Taraclia district. These are the only territorial units where Moldovans form a minority. Ukrainians are concentrated in northern Moldova, while national minorities overall comprise nearly half of Bălți, known as Moldova's northern capital. Russians live mainly in urban areas, and half of them are located in Chișinău. The nation's capital is a multiethnic city; however, the position of the titular nation is stronger here.

If Moldovans/Romanians stand divided on European integration, with a majority in favor (52%), then national minorities decidedly oppose the EU path, by 67% to 80%, depending on the ethnic group.⁴ Crucially, they express their views not only during elections, voting mainly for pro-Russian parties, but also in the form of other political actions. In February 2014, Gagauzia organized a referendum, which was declared illegal by the central authorities. The vast majority supported Moldova's integration with the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) instead of the EU and backed the proposition that, if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty, Gagauzia would become an independent republic. Loss of sovereignty could reference union with Romania⁵, but some analysts and politicians claim further integration with the EU could also constitute a loss of sovereignty. The authorities in the neighboring, ethnic Bulgarian district of Taraclia supported the referendum results and reminded the central authorities of their 2013 request for autonomy. On 27 June 2014, when the Association Agreement was signed, the Communist majority in Bălți city council expressed concerns about the AA and asked that the city receive special status, stating that otherwise it would initiate a referendum on the region's autonomy.⁶

³ Institute for Public Policy, "Barometer of Public Opinion," <<http://ipp.md/lib.php?l=ro&idc=156>>.

⁴ Institute for Public Policy, "Barometer of Public Opinion (April 2014)", slide 59, <http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/Brosura_BOP_04.2014_prima_parte_final_1_EN.ppt>.

⁵ National minorities generally believe that Moldova (or at least current pro-Western government) wants to reunite with Romania.

⁶ K. Calus, "Gagauzia: growing separatism in Moldova?", *OSW Commentary*, 10 March 2013, <www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-03-10/gagauzia-growing-separatism-moldova>; "Tarakliya khochet prisoyedinit'sya k Gagauzii, chtoby poluchit' pravo na vykhod iz sostava Moldavii", *REGNUM*,

Commentators frequently interpreted these political signals as further attempts to destabilize Moldova—already wrestling with Transnistrian separatism—and hinder Moldova's European integration process.

This paper seeks to analyze the attitudes of national minorities toward Moldova's European integration. The first section identifies several factors behind their Euroskepticism. The second section addresses future developments. It considers the potentially destabilizing effect of national minorities on Moldova's European path. Additionally, it contains recommendations on how to tackle the prevalence of Euroskepticism in these communities, based on countering the factors behind their negative attitude toward European integration.

9 April 2014, <www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1788987>; "Kommunisty namerevayutsya organizovat' referendum ob avtonomii Bel'ts", *AVA.MD*, 30 June 2014. <<http://ava.md/projects/pkrm/025778-kommunisti-namerevaqtsya-organizovat-referendum-ob-avtonomii-bel-c.html>>.

Reasons for National Minorities' Euroskepticism

There are ideological, informational, economic, political and social factors behind the Euroskepticism of Moldova's national minorities. These factors either directly or indirectly shape negative attitudes about EU approximation. They are either temporary—such as those related to current events or political competition—or systemic, related to governance or socioeconomic structures. They originate from the minorities themselves, Moldova's central authorities, and external actors, mainly Russia and the EU.

Ideological and public information factors

Not only Russian ethnics but a majority of Moldova's non-titular ethnic groups are largely pro-Russian because of cultural affinity and historical memory. National minorities are nearly synonymous with the Russian-speaking population, because many either do not know the Romanian language (or Moldovan, according to the country's constitution), or simply prefer to use Russian. The majority of them are Slavs. They perceive Russia as a positive international actor, their defender for centuries, and harbor nostalgia for the Soviet Union.⁷

National minorities have general knowledge about the European Union, but it is still quite limited. They know little about the European integration process, the EaP, AA or DCFTA. As a result, they fear change. While these problems concern Moldovans too, national minorities are less informed and more concerned than the titular nation.⁸ Moreover, they are misinformed; the image of the EU is besmirched by its opponents: local anti-European political parties and associations, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Kremlin-funded

⁷ The prevalence of nostalgia about the Soviet Union has been documented among national minorities across the former Soviet Union. See, for example, "Views of National Minorities", included in Chapter 5. Nationalism in Russia, in the Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Project, 5 December 2011, <www.pewglobal.org/2011/12/05/chapter-5-nationalism-in-russia/>.

⁸ See "Sociological Survey 'Widening the European Dialogue in Moldova.' RESULTS", prepared for the Slovak Atlantic Commission, 19 November 2013, <www.cepolicy.org/sites/cepolicy.org/files/attachments/survey_results.pdf>.

Russian media, which is preferred by national minorities because of the familiar language and attractive programming.

These opponents play on conservative values, asserting that the EU will destroy local morality. For example, while the EU-promoted law on anti-discrimination adopted by Moldova in 2012 ensures the rights of ethnic minorities, it is not appreciated by them because it also ensures the rights of sexual minorities. This aspect was highlighted by EU opponents, who claim that the EU promotes homosexuality, coining the slur Gayrope (Гейропа). Other Euroskeptic claims include that Moldova will lose its sovereignty, that the Romanian army would enter Moldova, that to join the EU the country must first accede to NATO, etc. There were even claims that the Moldovan police would shoot anyone who demonstrated against the EU.⁹

National minorities overwhelmingly support leftist parties, mainly the Communists, but not the center-right coalition promoting European integration. They mistrust the current government, because they associate it with Moldova's Romanianization and tightening links with Romania. This negative image stems from the collective memory that dates back to the interwar period when Moldova (Bessarabia) was a part of Romania; many minorities remember this time as one of occupation and national oppression. These memories were commonly used in Soviet propaganda to deepen separation between Romania and Moldova, which was incorporated into the Soviet Union in the 1940s. Minorities also recall the period of national rebirth of Moldovans and Moldova's Romanianization (with the possibility of the reunion of Moldova and Romania) at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, which contributed to ethnic conflict in Gagauzia and Transnistria. Also, pro-Russian groups in Moldova, including the Communists, project a negative image of Romania; they propagate the idea of Moldovanism, claiming that Moldovans are distinct from Romanians. It should be added that Romania itself in general, particularly during the term of President Traian Băsescu, has fueled the fears of Moldova's Russian-speaking population by calling for Romanian-Moldovan union, despite the lack of any broad support for this in Moldova.¹⁰

Some became disenchanted with European integration after its standard-bearer—the pro-European coalition—failed to prioritize anticorruption reforms, applied double standards in relation to opponents, or acted undemocratically; for example, by manipulating the electoral code. The European Union hesitated to criticize the

⁹ “‘Pervyy kanal’ o podpisanii Moldovoy Soglasheniya ob assotsiatsii”, *Point.md*, 30 June 2014, <<http://point.md/ru/novosti/politika/quotpervij-kanalquot-o-podpisanii-moldovoj-soglasheniya-ob-associacii>>.

¹⁰ K. Calus, T. Dąborowski, “The president of Romania supports unification with Moldova”, *OSW Analyses*, 4 December 2014, <www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-12-04/president-romania-supports-unification-moldova>.

coalition's poor behavior; it had invested much in the coalition and wanted to keep the government in power at almost any cost. Meanwhile, the EU had engaged in limited cooperation with other political groups, including the Communists supported by national minorities.

Finally, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine led to sharp polarization of the Moldovan population.¹¹ Two hostile camps arose: pro-Ukrainian/Western and pro-Russian. The Moldovan government sided with the former, national minorities with the latter.¹² Russian propaganda intensified considerably during the Ukrainian crisis, making dialogue between the two camps increasingly difficult. Given the genesis of the Ukraine conflict in pro-EU protest and its frequent framing in terms of geopolitical choice between East and West, the development of events in Ukraine has strongly affected Moldovan discourse about European integration.

Economic and political factors

Moldova is the largest recipient, per capita, of EU aid in the European Neighborhood,¹³ but the visibility of this support is limited. Even where EU-financed public works projects directly benefit national minorities, quite often they are unaware of the EU's role, because of low investment in project-level visibility criteria.¹⁴ Moreover, national minorities fear that the process of Moldova's integration with the

¹¹ Responding to whether the decision to incorporate Crimea into the Russian Federation was the freely expressed will of the population, some 74–97% of national minorities said yes. Only 3–21% of minorities said no. Conversely, about 40% of Moldovans/Romanians said yes and 40% said no. Institute for Public Policy, “Barometer of Public Opinion (April 2014)”, slide 88.

¹² See A. Andriyevskiy, “Russkoyazychnyye Moldovy: svoi ili chuzhiye”, AVA.MD, 28 April 2014, < <http://ava.md/analytics-commentary/024837-russkoyazichnie-moldovi-svoi-ili-chuzhie.html>>.

¹³ Delegation of the European Union to Moldova, “EU-Moldova Relations: Deliverables”, <http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/moldova/eu_moldova/political_relations/eu_moldova_relations_deliverables/index_en.htm>.

¹⁴ As experts note: “While EU funding amounts to some 5% of GDP or €40 per capita, this is not visible to the population as, since 2009, the money mainly went on institution building. The latest trend in EU funding—direct budgetary support—is not helping either as Moldovans cannot distinguish between EU money and means coming from the national budget. Meanwhile, the Russians are making their financial contribution very visible. In Transnistria, for example, Moscow is spending €43 per capita on food supplies and pension supplements alone, branding it as a gift from ‘mother Russia.’ Add to that the cheap gas Transnistrian households receive, compared to the high prices paid by the rest of Moldova's population, and we see a battle for hearts and minds, in which the EU is a reluctant player.” C. Ghinea, A. Paul and V. Chirila, “Helping Moldova stay on the EU course. Proposals for a real ‘more for more’ approach,” *EPC Policy Brief*, 11 December 2013, <www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_4006_helping_moldova_stay_on_the_eu_course.pdf>.

European Union will worsen their socioeconomic situation, at least in the short and medium term. A majority believes the Association Agreement will increase living costs, lead to economic decline and only move corruption behind closed doors. These fears are shared by many Moldovans, but a greater portion of minority groups are concerned.¹⁵

Many business people in Moldova's regions are concerned about bringing their products up to EU standards, as envisaged by the AA. They either have little idea about these requirements or believe it will take a long time to meet them and compete with European entrepreneurs in the free trade area. They fear this will hamper their economic activity. Moreover, Russian economic sanctions imposed on Moldova as punishment for its European aspirations also affected these ethnically comprised regions. Faced with the direct negative consequences of EU approximation, many felt it better to abandon the European course and keep close ties to Russia, an economic partner they know and already benefit from in a tangible way. Crucially, Russia is the main single-nation trading partner of Moldova, with a 26% share of exports and a 14% share of imports in 2013 (although the collective share of the EU states is bigger, respectively 47% and 45%).¹⁶ The Kremlin also deployed the carrot, suggesting Moldova's integration in the Customs Union would bring quick economic benefits, such as cheaper gas. Thus, the benefits of ECU accession may be easier for the public to understand than EU integration.

Another source of tension is the power-sharing conflict between Moldova's central government and its regions. Moldova is a centralized state and Chişinău is afraid of increasing regional authority. This fuels mistrust and hinders cooperation between the national minorities that populate the regions and the central government setting the European agenda. Gagauzia, an autonomous region since 1994, illustrates this point. Mihail Formuzal, the governor (*bashkan*) of Gagauzia, complains that "the region is treated by the authorities as an ordinary district".¹⁷ An official from one international organization admitted: "Gagauzia's competencies are neither clearly defined nor obeyed by the center." The official added: "I can't say the AA won't be used by Chişinău to limit Gagauzia's powers to an even greater extent ... the Gagauzians don't want to go to court, because they don't trust the corrupt Moldovan judiciary, which, frankly, is completely justified." As a caveat, the official stated another reason

¹⁵ "Sociological Survey 'Widening the European Dialogue in Moldova,' " p. 85, 90, 92. See also "Qualitative Survey: Make Moldova Home," Slovak Atlantic Commission and Central European Policy Institute, 5 June 2014, <www.cepolicy.org/publications/qualitative-survey-make-moldova-home>.

¹⁶ "Comerţul exterior al Republicii Moldova în anul 2013", <www.statistica.md/public/files/serii_de_timp/comert_exterior/serii_infraanuale/Com_Ext_2011_2013.zip>.

¹⁷ Unless stated otherwise, quotes are from interviews with the authors.

the Gagauzians do not press for a clear definition of the extent of their autonomy is because they also often benefit from the limits of their authority remaining undefined.¹⁸

Authorities in the ethnic regions pay particular attention to financial autonomy and independence—regardless of who is in power—but they claim their regions are underfinanced because their majorities support the Communists. Decentralization of decision-making on education, culture and language are also desired by national minorities.¹⁹ For example, Alexandr Garanovschii, president of the Taraclia district, complained that, “during recent educational reform, the government did not take into account that Bulgarians from the region still want to learn Bulgarian”. Crucially, administrative reforms aimed at decentralization are ongoing in Moldova, but proceeding with difficulties and reluctance on the part of the central government. On top of this, the reforms have lacked a public information component, resulting in poor understanding of their content. For example, Taraclia’s authorities fear that the reforms will dissolve their district, as happened during the 1998 territorial-administrative reform. Taraclia was re-established in late 1999 to prevent further conflict.

Regional elites and ethnic community leaders also use Euroskeptic and separatist rhetoric to gain resources. They behave as political entrepreneurs; they try to mobilize their local electorate and gain voters’ support by weighing in on sensitive issues. They also attempt to attract the attention of various external players so as to receive concessions. Elites expect the West, and also the Moldovan authorities, to compromise on certain issues or grant extra funding to stabilize the situation, while Russia rewards them for anti-European activism. A case in point is the 2014 Gagauz referendum. Soon after, Western donors pledged approximately €12 million over 3–5 years to support a long-term development plan for Gagauzia;²⁰ meanwhile, Russia lifted its Moldovan wine embargo solely for the region, and a joint commission of Moldovan and Gagauzian parliaments was convened to address the region’s problems.

Social factors

Chişinău failed to run a proper information campaign about the EU and Moldova’s European integration process. Importantly, it organized no such campaign about the Association Agreement. One

¹⁸ See also F. Prina, “What next for Moldova’s minorities after Crimea?”, *ECMI Brief* 33, July 2014, p. 15, <www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_lfpubdb/Brief_33.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ “Na dolgosrochnuyu programmu razvitiya Gagauzii vydelyat 12 mil. evro”, *GagauziaInfo.md*, 11 March 2014, <<http://gagauzianews.md/index.php?newsid=109>>.

Moldovan expert noted that “the ruling coalition may have not been sure if and when the document would be signed and thus did not want to focus public attention on it, so it would not be blamed in case of failure”. The government generally did not expend much effort communicating with its own society. On its European aspirations in particular, the government seemingly preferred to converse with EU institutions and European capitals. Arcadie Barbaroșie, director of the Institute for Public Policy, suggested that the Moldovan Foreign Ministry was almost within the European Union, followed closely by the government and elites, while the rest of society was left behind.²¹ This opinion was expressed in December 2011, but it still seems valid. Moreover, national minorities are particularly ignored, although this Euroskeptic group heavily influenced by Russia demands special attention. The government seems to have given up trying to convince national minorities about Europe, in order to save resources. Crucially, the government does not use the Russian language to reach them. Instead, the authorities stripped the pro-Communist TV station NIT of its license in 2012 and banned a Russian news channel in July 2014 due to bias. Whether or not these accusations have merit, these actions provoked considerable dissatisfaction among national minorities, and Chișinău did not offer any reasonable replacement of these media.

National minorities are not fully integrated into Moldovan society. Again, the central authorities bear partial responsibility for this. Veaceslav Berbeca, of the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS Viitorul), put it bluntly: “Chișinău [all governments] ... did not take anything from minorities, nor gave them tools to integrate them into Moldovan society.”²² First, the number of minorities in state administration is limited and their participation in public affairs meets obstacles. The main reason is lack of the Romanian language. According to an Ethnobarometer survey taken in 2004/2005, only about half of Russians, Ukrainians and Bulgarians, and 21% of Gagauzians spoke the state language either perfectly or very well, or could be understood in most situations, while about 40% of these four groups have minimal knowledge of Romanian.²³ Moreover, it seems that members of the titular nation are preferred in administrative hiring. As Formuzal emphasized, “there’s no Gagauzian working in the Foreign Ministry, not even a car driver”. UN Human Rights Advisor Claude Cahn believes that “national minorities view the practice of administrative preference in terms of ethnocapture”.

²¹ T. Horbowski, “Questions About Moldovan ‘Success Story’”, *EastBook*, 26 February 2012, <<http://eastbook.eu/en/2012/02/country-en/moldova-en/questions-about-moldovan-success-story/>>.

²² V. Berbeca, “Influence of Ethnic Minorities on State’s Foreign Policy”, *Moldova’s Foreign Policy Statewatch*, September 2011, p. 2, <www.viitorul.org/doc.php?!=en&idc=358&id=3540&t=/REGULAR-PUBLICATIONS/Moldovas-Foreign-Policy-Statewatch/Influence-of-ethnic-minorities-on-states-foreign-policy>.

²³ Ethnobarometer in the Republic of Moldova, Chișinău 2006, p. 30.

A visible lack of representation in government administration alienates national minorities, fueling mistrust of officials. It also hinders the government's ability to gain the minorities' support for the government's pro-Europe agenda, leaving them susceptible to Russian influence. Furthermore, national minorities tend to ethnicize reality to a greater extent than the titular majority, attributing negative experiences with the state to ethnic discrimination, rather than to political patronage or bureaucratic inefficiency. In other words, minorities may interpret the negative actions of the state as actions taken against their ethnic group in particular. This is a byproduct of group cohesion. For example, if the Taraclia district gets little funding from the center, the Bulgarians claim it is because the central government holds prejudice against their ethnic group, while the real reason might rather be political prejudice, based on Taraclia's support for the Communist opposition.

Prospects and Recommendations

Are national minorities a serious threat that can truly destabilize Moldova and derail its European project? What can be done to defuse tensions and convince national minorities to accept and support Moldova's integration with the European Union?

What can be expected from Moldova's national minorities?

The March 2014 detachment of Crimea from Ukraine and its annexation by Russia, as well as the ongoing separatist war in Eastern Ukraine, triggered concerns that Moldova faces a similar threat from its pro-Russian population, namely the national minorities. Political elites and the popular media declared that "events in Crimea might trigger some unwanted and undesirable developments in the southern part of Moldova"; "Bălți, with its pro-Russian sentiment, could become a Moldovan Donetsk", and, in reference to Gagauzia, "Moldova could have its own Donbas".²⁴ One Chișinău-based journalist claimed that Formuzal had already ordered 10,000 military uniforms for a militia he is allegedly planning to build.

In reality, at present, national minorities are mostly concerned with socioeconomics and repeatedly state they do not want war like in Eastern Ukraine. Speaking to Westerners, regional politicians are not as opposed to Moldova's government, its territorial integrity, and the European Union as their rhetoric might suggest.

Formuzal emphasizes that "we are not separatists", but elsewhere he admits he uses the independence card as "the ultimate argument" in disputes with the government. He adds: "Europe is okay. There are good roads, judiciary, clean streets. I appreciate visa

²⁴ M. Robinson, A. Tanas, "After Crimea, Moldova too fears 'unwanted' events on road to EU", *Reuters*, 30 March 2014, <www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/30/us-ukraine-crisis-moldova-idUSBREA2T0B820140330>; R. D. Kaplan, "Why Moldova Urgently Matters", *Stratfor*, 9 July 2014, <www.stratfor.com/sample/weekly/why-moldova-urgently-matters>; S. Gamova, "V Moldavii mozhet poyavit'sya svoy Donbass", *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 3 July 2014, <www.ng.ru/cis/2014-07-03/1_moldavia.html>. See also L. Litra, "Repercussions of the Ukraine Crisis for Moldova", *Institute of World Policy*, 16 July 2014, <<http://iwp.org.ua/eng/public/1176.html>>.

liberalization and expect the EU will continue helping us raise the living standards here. Gagauzia is small and must be friends with everybody.” In other interviews, his appraisal of the EU is harsher; it may be a sign of political entrepreneurship aimed at maximizing support for his region from as many sources as possible. Moreover, as Formuzal ends his second and final term as governor, he seems eager to continue his career at the national level; this rather excludes sedition.

Garanovschii is concerned almost exclusively about socioeconomic problems in Taraclia district. He emphasizes that “Taraclia is the least-financed region, regardless of who is in power We want autonomy to get more stable financing, to be sure our region will not be abolished, and to make it the official cultural center of Moldova’s Bulgarians. We are not separatists.” Indeed, Bulgarians have never seriously played the separatist card, despite some related proposals floated between Taraclia and Gagauzia. Garanovschii added: “Taraclia’s people vote for the Communists, but we are not against the EU. We visit Bulgaria and see living conditions are better.”

Ion Bodrug, a former member of Bălți city council from the coalition Democratic Party, was sure that a recent request for municipal autonomy by the local Communists—made on the day when the Association Agreement was signed—“was merely a symbolic reaction to the signing of the AA and confirmation of their geopolitical views to reassure their electorate”. He added that, at present, as a director of the governmental North Regional Development Agency, he had good working relations with the regional and local Communist authorities.

Some claim Russia is behind the separatism of national minorities, citing, for example, Formuzal’s frequent meetings in Moscow. Indeed, Russia influences minorities and is able to identify and exploit the weaknesses in the relationship between Chișinău and the local administrations. But there is no evidence to support the supposition of direct control over national minorities. There are too many much more obvious reasons for tensions between the ethnic regions and the government: local politics, overall neglect, inadequate information, political ambitions, socioeconomics, etc.

This does not exclude the potential for serious conflict. The tensions already present can be exploited and amplified by external actors, especially Russia. Separatism was provoked in Crimea and Donbas, and heavily supported by Moscow. The pretext was defense of Russians and Russian-speaking populations, and of their right to self-determination, due to the alleged threat of the pro-EU “junta” in Kyiv, which came to power as a result of an “anti-constitutional coup” and which supported “aggressive nationalism and chauvinism”.²⁵

²⁵ “Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding accusations of Russia’s violation of its obligations under the Budapest Memorandum of 5 December

Moldovan expert Andrei Iovu believes that “Ukraine can be repeated here, in Moldova. State institutions are weak and easily destabilized. Who would have expected that Crimea would be annexed and a war in Eastern Ukraine? The ethnic situation was ‘stable’ there.” Moldovan law enforcers recently claimed that a group of young Gagauzian men had received military training in Russia, in order to undertake “subversive and unconstitutional activities that could harm the security and territorial integrity of the country”.²⁶ The Gagauzian authorities categorically deny this.

What can be done to win over the national minorities?

The first task is to organize well-prepared and comprehensive information campaigns on the European Union, the Euro-integration process, and the development assistance given by Western countries, the EU and various Western organizations. The advantages of the Association Agreement should be explained; the benefits have already been calculated. Analyses show that, despite the costs of meeting European standards, integration with the EU provides Moldova with a path for modernization, sustainable economic growth, and significant welfare benefits.²⁷ It is important to emphasize that the AA is also about regional development, which is the priority of regional elites. It is also important that these information campaigns use Russian and other minority languages.

From Chişinău, greater cooperation, dialogue and transparency are needed in relations with the ethnic regions. Chişinău should not connect the ongoing reforms aimed at decentralization of powers to separatism; no case-based evidence of this correlation exists in the region, and the successful preemption of Gagauzian separatism in the 1990s by granting the region autonomous rights tells a different tale. Balanced and clearly delineated power structures between regional and central authorities are unlikely to empower separatism and more likely to stabilize relations between the center and the regions. International organizations should lend expertise here to find an equitable solution in keeping with national law and international standards. If settling tensions in Gagauzia is a priority, then an important first step is clear division of powers between the autonomy and the center. Mihail Sirkeli, the executive director of

1994,” 1 April 2014, <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/B173CC77483EDEB944257CAF004E64C1>.

²⁶ “Territoriya zagovora”, *NewsMaker*, 8 August 2014, <<http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/territoriya-zagovora>>.

²⁷ See V. Prohniţchi, “Strategic Comparison of Moldova’s Integration Options: Deep and Comprehensive Economic Integration with the EU Versus the Accession to the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union”, *Economic Analysis and Forecast Paper*, No. 3 (2012) and other publications by Expert Grup at <<http://expert-grup.org>>.

Gagauz NGO, noted to the authors: “Neither Chişinău nor Comrat [capital of Gagauzia] has a clear vision of their common relations, they live in separate worlds. But the ball is on the central government’s court. If they can’t do anything in breakaway Transnistria, if they had no power over Gagauzia in the early 1990s [when the self-declared Gagauz Republic existed], today they have a chance to govern in Gagauzia, which they control now, which functions in Moldova’s legal system.”

New EU member states from Central Europe could be more involved. They are mentally closer to the post-Soviet space, have fresh experience of Euro-integration, as well as of similar obstacles, and some have compatriots among Moldova’s national minorities. Initiatives that should be replicated include Bulgaria’s opening of a Euro-center at Taraclia University, the Slovak Atlantic Commission’s organization of a European Café Tour, with a focus on national minorities,²⁸ or the support of Moldova’s European aspirations voiced by the delegation of the already EU-associated Turkey during a visit to Gagauzia. More study tours to the EU for officials, activists and business people from the ethnic localities should be organized; personal experience is an effective myth-buster. There is also scope for Romania to be engaged; support of socioeconomic projects, in cooperation with other donors, could improve its negative image among national minorities.²⁹ With no Romanian bogeyman, overall perception of the EU could improve.

A second, more complicated, task is the social integration of national minorities. The central government should develop a comprehensive system for teaching Romanian; as an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) official said, “It seems we’re more concerned with teaching national minorities the state language than the government”. Instead of the government promoting the Romanian language at the expense of Russian, it could launch the state TV in Russian with Romanian subtitles and *vice versa*, to directly reach national minorities. People-to-people contacts between ethnic regions and other parts of Moldova could also be improved. Elena Cuijuclu, a lecturer at Comrat State University, noted that “young Gagauzians do not participate in national conferences, summer schools or camps with Moldovans, where they could get to know each other”. Greater numbers of national minorities in state institutions should be facilitated. The 2001 bill on national minorities states in article 24 that these groups have a right to proportional representation in the executive, judiciary, army, and law enforcement.

²⁸ See www.ata-sac.org/news/european-cafe-tour-minority-issues-resonate-strongly-among-public-moldova-deepens-its-relations.

²⁹ O. Milewski, “Poland and Romania: Extending the partnership in the EuroEast”, *New Eastern Europe*, 8 September 2013, www.neweasterneurope.eu/interviews/853-poland-and-romania-extending-the-partnership-in-the-euroeast.

Another important step is accepting and implementing the strategy on national minorities currently under development with the cooperation of the OSCE. The strategy is due at the end of 2014, but it depends on politicians when it is approved.

The short- and medium-term aims of this strategy are to resolve current tensions—concerning the participation of national minorities in the sociopolitical life of the country, language issues, education overall and mass media—and then to tackle more complex tasks, such as fostering Moldovan patriotism among non-Moldovan ethnic groups and building a civic nation that would include all citizens of the country, regardless of their ethnic origin. Although the Moldovan constitution mentions “the nation of the Republic of Moldova” for all its citizens, in reality, this inclusive, civic nation has not yet been built. Moldova’s national minorities perceive themselves to be alienated from the central government’s policy-making process and they view the cause of this alienation as rooted in ethnic bias. Only conscious efforts to integrate these minority groups in social and political structures can lead to widespread belief in the civic nation of Moldova among all of the country’s ethnic groups.

Unexpectedly, perhaps, Victor Kalaşnicov, leader of the Bălţi branch of the Russian Youth League, might be a hopeful sign of this future civic nation: “Moldova is my country. I am Tatar by descent, I declared ‘Russian’ on the census—but I am Moldovan in a civic sense, even if I couldn’t mark that on a questionnaire.” While minorities perceive Moldova’s past and future differently, a civic identity is a fundamental base for unity in a multiethnic nation. But the lack of consensus in Moldova on the identity of the titular nation (Moldovan or Romanian?) is a serious obstacle.³⁰

Finally, the EU should cooperate with all mainstream political parties in Moldova, including the Party of Communists favored by minorities. Currently, this party favors Moldova’s accession to the ECU, but it has made geopolitical shifts in the past. It supported EU integration for a considerable time, at least in word, while in power in the 2000s. Interestingly, popular support for Moldova’s European aspirations was at its highest ever then, reaching 70%. Additionally, the EU should pay more attention to its values—such as the rule of law—than to geopolitical games. More evenhanded criticism of the ruling coalition is needed, such as that modeled by the German ambassador to Moldova from 2012–2014, Matthias Meyer.³¹

³⁰ See also D. A. Zabarrah, *Nation- and Statehood in Moldova*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011.

³¹ M. Levchenko, “Moldovu dosrochno pokidayut srazu tri diplomata”, *RFI*, 15 July 2014, <www.russian.rfi.fr/evropa/20140715-moldovu-dosrochno-pokidayut-srazu-tri-diplomata>.

Conclusion

Moldova's progress toward Europe is not yet irreversible. One step to stay on the path is winning the favor of Moldova's Euroskeptics, including national minorities.³² Not only could the EU gain their support, but it could also relax tensions that could derail Moldova's European project if these are exploited by a Russia eager to promote its own Eurasian integration project.

Many non-Moldovans moved to Moldova during the Soviet era. Today many of them are nostalgic for the Soviet Union and pro-Russian. They have been indoctrinated by domestic anti-European players and the Russian media. Many of them have avoided learning the Romanian language for the over 20 years of Moldovan independence. The ethnic regions try to increase their authority at the expense of centralized authorities. This is one reason why the current pro-European government mistrusts these localities, exhibits little flexibility, and tends to ignore them outright. This approach is unsustainable. National minorities will not disappear as Moldova moves closer to the EU. The socioeconomic, political and national identity factors at the root of the current tensions must inevitably be addressed.

Increasing communication with national minorities, decentralizing appropriate powers to the ethnic regions, and strengthening civic identity by integrating non-Moldovans are all tasks that must be carried out primarily by the Moldovan government. Still, there is a considerable role for Western partners and international organizations seeking to increase Moldova's stability and prosperity. These steps should be taken after the November 2014 parliamentary elections, in which pro-European parties have a chance of winning and forming a new-old government coalition. While the resistance of Russia and Moldova's pro-Russian groups to greater engagement between the center and the national minorities may be significant, taking no action will only increase the opportunity for tension. On the other hand, successful integration of the ethnic regions could serve as a model and promote the process of Transnistria's reintegration—an aim that Chișinău still lists as a priority, and another step that the West expects Moldova to take on its path toward Europe.

³² S. Secieru, "Moldova on the path to Europe...", *op. cit.* [3].