

SAC

The Slovak Atlantic Commission (SAC) is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that has been giving Central Europe a powerful voice in the foreign policy debate for the past two decades. With the understanding that transnational challenges require international solutions, the Commission supports deeper regional, European and transatlantic cooperation on the basis of instrumental values, particularly democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.

CEPI

The Central European Policy Institute (CEPI) is a regional think-tank established and run by SAC based in Bratislava, Slovakia. Its mission is to help decision-makers and opinion-makers in Central Europe craft common responses to current challenges, and to improve the quality of their contributions to the Euro-Atlantic debates. It does so by engaging the region's top experts and institutions, promoting innovative solutions, and working closely with governments to turn recommendations into policy.



Qualitative Survey: Make Moldova a „Home“

The Slovak Atlantic Commission (SAC), in cooperation with the Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), has commissioned a comprehensive survey about the perceptions of Moldovans towards the European Union (EU), the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) in the context of value orientations.

The focus groups conducted in Moldova between 28 March and 11 April 2014 represent the second (qualitative) stage in the survey of public attitudes. They followed a nation-wide representative poll (quantitative) undertaken in October-November 2013 to enable an individual-level response and more in-depth investigation of some of the key issues raised by the poll.¹

This qualitative survey was carried out by Professor Elena Korosteleva from the Global Europe Centre, University of Kent, in collaboration with the Moldova-based Independent Sociological and Information Service "Opinia", and coordinated by Michal Skala, Director of Transfer of Know-How Programme at the Slovak Atlantic Commission.

Key Trends

Despite a decline in support for the European Union (EU) registered in our previous poll, the qualitative survey shows that EU narratives are making inroads into Moldova's public attitudes. Although public opinion about immediate economic benefits, preferences and market accessibility of the EU and the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) may be divided, there was no doubt amongst respondents that cooperation with the EU offered a more stable outlook into the future. The European direction is now decisively regarded as part of Moldova's national interest and strongly associated with "living better and facing the future with more confidence". Moreover, Transnistria is no longer seen as an obstacle to Moldova's European integration.

What constitutes a real shift is an increasing sense of urgency focused on rebuilding Moldova's state capacity – as a „home“ - to make it a strong, independent, stable, functional and self-respecting nation. Growing demand for more domestic stability, more effective government and more balanced neighbourly relations with all interested parties are evident. This is coupled with the notion that local reforms must come first, EU membership (perspective) after.

¹We are grateful to Balázs Jarábik, Associate Fellow at the Central European Policy Institute, for his comments and editing inputs provided for the earlier version of the survey.

The EU efforts start paying off: there is an increasing awareness that how the EU support helps Moldova corresponds to peoples needs, neatly expressed as „I really feel change, in education, in justice and in our lives“. Although Moldovans think they are perceived in Europe as „second-rate“, poor and underdeveloped, they also feel they are important as „the only state in the region with a favourable attitude to the EU“. Respondents also feel they can trust the EU, and that the EU, in return, has trust in Moldova. Although cultural differences were explicitly noted, many believed there was room for shared learning as well as coexistence in diversity.

Confirming the poll findings, Moldovans experience a sense of rivalry between the EU and the ECU and express a growing concern about the prospect for constructive dialogue between the EU and Russia, seeing implications for the neighbourhood. As Moldovans felt split between the two alternatives, they strongly preferred, at least in the short term, more balanced relations with neighbours, including Russia. But no respondent referred to the ECU as a foreign policy priority.

The perception is that while the EU may not know Moldovans well enough and hence treat them cautiously, Russia knows the Moldovans too well and treats them derogatively: Moldovans feel they are often treated in a derogatory and abrasive manner in Russia, often being referred to as “dirty people“. Many indicated no sense of trust in Russia-Moldova relations, with the latter being viewed as relations of subordination and compliance. The ECU and Russia are regarded as important and accessible suppliers of energy and goods, but also as a source of political pressure, poverty and instability.

The most important lessons learned from the Crimea and Ukraine crisis are that to assure stability, there is a need for better communication, more information as well as signs that the government is becoming more effective. The EU should not attempt to do the job for Moldovans, but, it should remain in the position of a supporter of reforms.

Detailed Findings

Moldova between Integrations: Let Tiraspol Go

Despite a slight decline in public interest and support for the EU registered in the 2013 nation-wide representative survey, the individual-level responses of focus groups display reassuring patterns of the ongoing internalisation of the EU narratives into the public mind-set in Moldova.

In particular, when discussing their country's foreign policy priorities as well as most pressing needs and public interests, the respondents seem to have fallen into two major categories: 1) those feeling fully committed to the European course: “I personally see the light at the end of the tunnel, and that light is the EU. I see achievements, decent living, prosperity for our youth without being forced by circumstances to abandon their homes for income“; and 2) those feeling European, but prioritising Moldova's independence and interests, which they see in rebuilding its state capacity for a strong and self-respected nation that would have peaceful and stable relations with all neighbours, including Russia, for the benefit of all.

Both groups felt that stability and order were a priority, which should be reinforced by the narratives of success and more information on the current and future directions from their government.

All respondents indicated that they wanted to see healthy and balanced relations with all their neighbours, and especially with Russia and Ukraine, while anticipating the development of closer ties with Europe. Many also expressed a growing sense of affinity with the European nations, especially Romania and Germany. No respondent referred to the ECU as a foreign policy priority. At the same time, a sense of acute ambivalence prevailed when juxtaposing the EU and Russia. Respondents felt they had limited information to fully commit to their European future and feared it would come at a great personal cost and insecurity. They also insisted on the need to have a good working relationship with both power centres and loathed having to choose between them: “we need stability, safety and welfare, with all our neighbours“, arguing that „being one-sided would be detrimental for Moldova“. They valued Russia as a market for jobs, goods and trade,

while the EU is an attractive but still distant future. When pressed further, the majority said that they would prioritise the EU, because of its higher living standards, advancement, work opportunities, different (more positive) attitude, transparency, continuing support and also because the EU had become the choice of the younger generation.

All respondents agreed that the EU and Russia would struggle to cooperate in the future over the neighbourhood, and Ukraine serves as a testimony to Russia's obstructive behaviour. The most desirable outcome for Moldova however would be a constructive dialogue with the two unions: „Now it is impossible to be with two unions... But ideally, we would like to live with both – the EU and Russia“.

To resolve the dilemma of choice, many respondents felt that the imperative was prioritisation of domestic reforms – to build a strong and respected nation. This indicates a shift in public attitudes from their excessive reliance on EU guidance, as registered by the 2009 focus groups, to a growing sense of self-awareness and realisation of the need to be independent and esteemed. The groups contended that fostering a more visible and effective government would be of great importance: "There is a president, but we do not see him"; "there should be more stability as well as clarity of direction"; "there should be better communication on why and what". The „we should be rebuilding Moldova" choir is growing: "when we are strong, we are respected". Owing to the lack of information and regular communication campaigns, people felt "unwanted" and "removed from making decisions", and that the government interests were „not always aligned with public needs“.

Transnistria was no longer seen as an obstacle to further European integration. Respondents felt that Transnistria has become too different compared to them. They also felt it proved it could survive independently from Moldova and many believe the government should „let it go“.

EU-Moldova: Not Seen as a Nation

A trend for critical self-assessment, detected in public attitudes in the 2013 poll, seems to continue at the

individual level of focus groups. In particular, respondents felt that "the EU does not yet see us as a nation". Accordingly "we are still perceived as part of the [former Soviet Union] or Russia"; as a "second-rate, poor and inferior nation" as well as "they see us as backward, we've got low economic and cultural levels of development", but "the truth is they don't know Moldova". Respondents also commented that often „living beyond our means and having all these luxurious cars and mansions at the disposal of our politicians" may send a wrong message to Europe. Only a handful of respondents mentioned corruption as an endemic problem of the state.

At the same time, there are some signs of a more positive appraisal and self-perception: "I think the EU believes we are an honest and good-hearted nation, they like our cuisine and appreciate our culture"; and "they see us as hard-working and willing to study", moreover "they trust us and perceive us as willing to cooperate". At the same time "we are now treated with respect". Respondents also increasingly believe that Moldova is too important for Europe being almost „the only state in the region remaining strongly in favour of the EU“. This perception is further reinforced by a sense of trust between the EU and Moldova: "we trust the EU because they really support us and we now see some real benefits" and "they certainly have confidence in us, which we've now earned".

There is an increasing congruence in public perceptions of what the EU does for Moldova and what people really need. The respondents believe the EU could help improve governance, especially when implementing reforms, infrastructure, legal system, quality of life, human rights protection, and more generally, to help with strategic development and instil a new way of thinking, while "we could do all the rest ourselves". These attitudes fully corresponded to respondents' call for better education, more stability, more effective governance and rebuilding infrastructure at home to create permanent jobs and wages. Education, water projects, agriculture, business, technologies were identified as success stories of the EU-Moldova cooperation. As one respondent commented: "I really could feel changes: reforms are slow, we are still fighting with corruption and for quality. But you could now see villages with schools and nurseries;

improving justice and health systems; proper water supplies for rural communities, and much more!"

At the same time, the normative differences registered in the 2009 and 2013 surveys, continue to persist. A set of values specifically identified as different from European include family connections(also referring to extended family lodging), religion, traditions, spirituality, emotiveness, dressing, manners and "mentality" more broadly. The differences are observed even in daily practices: "I noticed they cut bread very thinly; whereas we prefer quantity." These differences are not seen as an obstacle to further integration, rather as a signature of the Moldovan people, who are open to shared learning: "our customs and traditions are by no means an impediment to cultural dialogue! We can learn a lot from each other and there are also notions of universal values, which we all should respect". Many agreed that the best ways to accommodate differences are through tourism and travelling.

The Moldovans remain positive about the EU membership perspective. They do not anticipate it soon, but contend that it would only be natural, when reforms are implemented. Major obstacles to closer integration are seen in excessive state bureaucracy ("too many chiefs"), corruption, indifference and hypocrisy and the lack of political will.

Moldova and Russia: No trust

Respondents conveyed a strong preference for more balanced relations with all neighbours, including Russia. The differences in narratives towards both power centres become more apparent when respondents were pressed to choose between the two and describe their attitudes to both the EU and Russia.

Many respondents observe strong historic connections and collective memories with Russia, based on language, cultural traditions and its accessibility. At the same time, many also note differences in attitudes when compared to the EU: "Russia still sees us as part of the [former Soviet Union], and by default, part of Russia", while "Moldovans for them are associated with dirty people, beggars"

and "they treat us as migrant workers, with no rights or equality". We are "second-class citizens" there and "they see us as parasites who cause problems". The notion that "we are not treated as an independent nation, we are Russia's extension, we are dependants" explains their shift. Only very occasionally, a positive comment emerged suggesting that "Russia knows us well, we shared history with them, they know we are just 'Gastarbeiter' for them". The differentiating factor between the EU and Russia, in perceptions of respondents, seems to be a degree of "familiarity": while the EU may not know the Moldovans well enough and hence treat them cautiously, Russia knows the Moldovans too well and treats them derogatively.

All respondents commented on the low levels of trust between the two countries: "There is none and never has been. There is only subordination and compliance". Nevertheless, respondents view Russia as an important source for their economic stability, in terms of providing gas and oil supplies, and also serving as a market to sell their goods, and agricultural produce.

That said, Russia is also seen as a source of anxiety, insecurity and poverty: "Poverty in Russia is bigger than ours, and they only pretend they help to reform..."; "Russia will never help Moldova"; "they might help with Transnistria because Putin is clever but only if they wanted to". More often respondents note their sense of remorse, and dependency on Russia, and look forward to rebuilding themselves as a nation to withstand the pressure: "Why can't they leave us forever in peace??", especially that „our economic relations are not functioning at all, mainly because of Russia's unfair treatment and regular embargoes".

In the 2013 survey many respondents expressed their awareness of the ECU and appreciation of the prospect for collaboration. However, focus groups conveyed a sense of division vis-à-vis developing closer relations with the ECU: "taking jobs there – yes, but not at the expense of freedom"; "I can't see a Single Economic Space happening any time soon, like anything else in Russia". Many noted that the younger generation is now strongly committed to Europe and "the government should seek compromise to develop healthy relations with ECU, but not at the expense of the EU". Interestingly,

although many common cultural features were identified between the Moldovans and Russians, including the Orthodox faith, language, traditions and even mind-set; a stronger cultural affinity has now been displayed with Europe, even if in rhetoric only. The most important lessons learned from the Crimea and Ukraine crisis are that to assure stability,

there is a need for better communication, more information as well as signs that the government is becoming more effective. The EU should not attempt to do the job for Moldovans, but, it should remain in the position of a supporter of domestic reforms.

¹ The 2013 poll showed that the EU remained attractive for Moldova, but it was not a default option yet. To many Moldovans, it was the ECU that represented a model that may potentially offer a quick-fix solution for stability, prosperity and security. As a result, the public opinion was explicitly divided between the two regional power centres. Asked to choose between support for the EU or the ECU, a slight majority of the Moldovans (44%) preferred the EU over the ECU (40%). For more please see: <http://www.cepolicy.org/news/moldovans-attracted-eu-not-sure-about-membership>.