



MOLDOVA'S DIFFICULT CHOICE: EUROPEAN OR EURASIAN INTEGRATION

Moldova is one of the members of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) officially launched on May 7, 2009 and consisting of six post-Soviet states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The EaP is meant to serve as the framework for discussions between the European Union (EU) and its Eastern European and Caucasian neighbors on issues of economic cooperation, trade, regional economic policy implementation and others. The aim of the EaP consists in promoting cooperation with the EU under conditions of stability, democracy and prosperity, and Moldova's membership in the EaP was the first significant step towards the European integration.

At the beginning, the efforts and ambitions of Moldova in its commitment to cooperate in building its path towards the European integration were rather convincing. The negotiations between the EU and Moldova over an association agreement began in 2010 and focused on political reforms, foreign and security policy, cooperation, ensuring justice, freedom and security etc. At the same time, the "Visa Dialogue" was launched between the EU and Moldova aimed at including the latter to the list of countries whose nationals are exempt from the visa requirement for entering the EU. This objective was achieved relatively fast by April 2014, becoming the first major achievement of Moldova in its rapprochement with the EU. Shortly after this, the association agreement between the EU and Moldova was signed on June 27, 2014 and ratified by the Moldovan Parliament on July 2, 2014. The agreement established a new legal framework for further development of relations between Moldova and the EU, which was another remarkable success of Chisinau in its path towards European integration.

In July 2016, Moldova and Georgia became the first countries to ratify the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement with the EU. The agreement provides Moldova with access to certain sectors of the European single market. It also ensures the same regulatory environment in the associated country for investors as in the EU, which is essentially important for a developing economy like Moldova. The DCFTA became

the third major achievement of Moldova in its partnership with the EU, which gave rise to expectations of a further acceleration of Moldova in its path towards the European integration. A visible progress made by Moldova compared to other EaP member countries made many to perceive Moldova as a front-runner and the first country that would achieve full EU membership in a relatively short period of time.

However, after 2016 Moldova has made practically no further progress in fulfilling the previously undertaken commitments in conducting reforms aimed at ensuring stability and democratic principles. One of the reasons for Moldova's limited success in accomplishing its goal might well be the failure of the EU in evaluating the aspirations and potential of the country in implementing the necessary reforms. In fact, most of the agreements reached between Moldova and the EU were mostly initiated by the EU itself, including the invitation to take part in the European Neighborhood Policy and the EaP.

The second obvious reason is the policy conducted by incumbent President Igor Dodon who ran for presidency as a candidate sympathetic to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and won the election in November 2016. In spite of a number of factors such as limited presidential power, no clear and stable support in the parliament, and overall turbulent political landscape, President Dodon managed to take significant steps in establishing a close partnership with Russia as well as with the EAEU. In May 2018, Moldova gained an observer status in the EAEU, which allows its authorized representatives to attend meetings of the union's bodies and receive documents accepted by the member states.

One of the greatest advantages of having closer economic partnership with Russia and the EAEU for Moldova is that the decision-making mechanism in the EAEU is not highly institutionalized. Unlike in case with the European integration, the partnership of Moldova with Russia and the EAEU allows it to have momentary and tangible economic gains. Thus, thanks to its close partnership and active negotiations with Russia, within his first

presidential term, President Igor Dodon managed to resolve a number of highly sensitive economic issues with notable benefits for Moldova. These include the amnesty for labor migrants from Moldova, the preferential treatment for Moldovan goods in Russia, gas price discounts, and many others. As one might expect, these sizable immediate economic benefits have given rise to Euroscepticism and caused an increasing pro-Russian and pro-Eurasian sentiment in the Moldovan society.

According to the most recent survey, 43.5% of Moldovans would welcome the idea of joining the EU. In general, this percentage tends to oscillate between 33 and 48%, whereas the share of those supporting the idea of the accession to the EAEU usually ranges between 27 and 42%. On the other hand, a thorough analysis of different polls on this matter shows that the majority of supporters of Moldova's membership in the EAEU do not really mean it, but rather would like to see Moldova having good economic relations with Russia without joining the EAEU. During the last EAEU summit held on May 19, 2020, President Dodon firmly reaffirmed his commitment to following the eastern vector in the external economic policy of Moldova and expressed the country's readiness for a more active involvement in the Eurasian integration.

It is obvious now that the agenda of choosing the vector of Moldova's future integration will be the key issue during the presidential election scheduled for November 1, 2020. Maia Sandu, the de facto leader of the opposition and most probable electoral competitor of Dodon, is highly critical about the partnership of Moldova with the EAEU and proposes the strictly European vector of future integration. Analyzing the last ten years of Moldova's economic relations with the EU and the EAEU, we can state that the decision on choosing the vector of future integration of Moldova depends not only on citizens of Moldova but also on the positions of the two major external players – the EU and Russia.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sent a letter to his Kazakh counterpart Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in which he commended Kazakhstan's measures to tackle the spread of COVID-19. According to President Erdogan, Turkey dispatched the necessary medical equipment to support the fraternal country. The Turkish leader expressed his confidence that Kazakhstan and Turkey will continue to strengthen further their bilateral strategic partnership (Akorda, 18.05.2020).
- At its plenary session, the Senate of Kazakhstan adopted amendments to the laws "On Elections" and "On Political Parties" that provide for the establishment of the mandatory 30% quota for women and youth under 29 years in electoral lists of political parties. In addition, the threshold for creating and registering a political party was lowered twice – from 40,000 to 20,000 members (Kazakh TV, 21.05.2020).
- According to Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs, about 60 Chinese workers, armed with stones and sticks, attacked the head office of the Tajik-Chinese Mining and Industrial Company located in the town of Zarnisor. Wage arrears were reported as a reason for their discontent, but some sources suggest that Chinese citizens demanded to send them back to China. Following unsuccessful negotiations between workers, company representatives and local officials, the special purpose police unit arrived at the site and suppressed the riot (Radio Ozodi, 21.05.2020).
- Anti-terrorism units of the 201st Russian military base located in Tajikistan participated in an exercise aimed at improving combat skills in countering an attack of subversive and terrorist groups against the military camps of the base located in Dushanbe and Bohtar. Under the exercise scenario, the units were required to block and destroy militants, dispose of improvised explosive devices, and release hostages (Regnum, 18.05.2020).
- The armed forces of Azerbaijan conducted a large-scale tactical exercise in accordance with the combat training plan for 2020. During the exercise, the focus was on issues of combat readiness, planning and comprehensive support of operations, and interaction of command and control units of various types of troops. Up to 10,000 military personnel, about 120 tanks and armored vehicles, nearly 200 missile and artillery systems, 30 aircraft, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles, took part in the drill (Trend, 18.05.2020).
- Ukraine will send evidence related to the seizure of Ukrainian sailors and vessels by Russian security forces in the Kerch Strait to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea arbitral tribunal in The Hague. In November 2018, Russia captured three Ukrainian ships, which were on a scheduled re-deployment from the Black Sea port of Odesa to the Azov Sea port of Mariupol. In September 2019, 24 crewmembers were freed in a prisoner swap between Ukraine and Russia, while the ships were returned in November 2019 (UNIAN, 22.05.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- During a videoconference meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Council, the heads of the EAEU member states approved in general terms the Strategy for the Development of Eurasian Economic Integration until 2025. At the same time, the EAEU leaders instructed their governments to finalize the document for the next meeting of the council, which is planned to be held in person. The council also approved the main guidelines of the macroeconomic policy of the EAEU states for 2020-2021 (Eurasian Economic Commission, 19.05.2020).
- Presidents of Kazakhstan and Iran Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Hassan Rouhani had a phone conversation to discuss ways to expand bilateral trade and economic cooperation. President Rouhani expressed Iran's interest in increasing trade with Kazakhstan and stressed the need to use more effectively the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway, as well as multimodal corridors across the Caspian Sea. In his turn, President Tokayev proposed to develop practical measures at the government level to boost mutual economic ties (Akorda, 20.05.2020).
- Starting June 1, 2020, Kazakhstan will remove export restrictions and quotas on agricultural products. In March 2020, to ensure domestic supply amid the pandemic, the government introduced wheat and flour export quotas at 200,000 tons and 70,000 tons, respectively, and banned exports of buckwheat, sugar, potato, onion, garlic, and sunflower oil. As part of state support, agricultural producers will also receive preferential microloans at the 6% rate per annum (The Astana Times, 22.05.2020).
- The delegations of the railway administrations of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran held an online meeting to discuss the development of trilateral cooperation in the transport and logistics sphere. The parties noted the importance of joint steps for a quick solution of issues to ensure food security and unhindered movement of goods. They also exchanged views on measures taken to organize disinfection tunnels at borders to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during cargo transportation (Uzbekistan Railways, 24.05.2020).
- Due to the oil price crash and the nationwide shutdown of the economy caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Russia's GDP in April 2020 contracted by 28% in nominal terms compared with April 2019. Economic losses amount to 2.4 trillion rubles (\$33 billion), around third of which can be attributed to low oil prices, while two-thirds come from the effects of Russia's "non-working" period that lasted from the end of March to mid-May 2020 (The Moscow Times, 19.05.2020).
- As announced during an online meeting of Belarusian and Uzbek officials, the trade between the two countries reached \$239 million in 2019, up 1.5 times year-on-year. The positive trend continued in the first quarter of 2020, with mutual trade increasing by 54.1% to total \$53.8 million. The parties also discussed cooperation in agriculture, transport and logistics, light and food industries (BelITA, 20.05.2020).

Society and Culture

- At a meeting with representatives of the Crimean Tatar people held on the day of remembrance of their deportation, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr would receive the status of state religious holidays and that a new large mosque would be built in Kiev. Zelensky also initiated the creation of a working group in the presidential office to address problems of the Crimean Tatar people (President of Ukraine, 18.05.2020).
- On the eve of its 10th anniversary, the International Turkic Academy held a video conference titled "Abai and the 21st Century: the Continuity over Time". High-ranking officials and researchers from the Turkic-speaking and other countries, as well as representatives of international organizations, participated in the event dedicated to the 175th anniversary of the great poet. During the conference, several new books published by the academy were presented, including a complete collection of Abai's works in Turkish (TWESCO, 21.05.2020).
- Azerbaijan's National Art Museum and Kazakhstan's A. Kastejev State Museum of Arts organized a virtual exhibition "Almaty-Baku. Spring. Eurasian Art Union" dedicated to the International Museum Day. The exhibition that displayed art works of well-known Azerbaijani and Kazakh artists sparked vivid interest among viewers. The event became the first project implemented under a memorandum of cooperation signed between the two museums in 2019 (AzerNews, 19.05.2020).
- The Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan, jointly with the Republican Child and Youth Development Center and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, launched a series of virtual museum tours called the "Week of Museums of the Turkic World". Under the project, Azerbaijani schoolchildren explored the Kazakh National Museum, the Kyrgyz National Art Museum, the Turkish Museum of Troy, the Uzbek State Historical Museum, and the Hungarian National Museum (AzerNews, 19.05.2020).
- The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women provided humanitarian aid to vulnerable groups of women in Kyrgyzstan's regions. In total, more than 700 women with low incomes in 27 communities across the country received assistance in the form of basic hygiene kits contains napkins, sanitary pads, soap, powder, disinfectants, sanitizers, and personal protective equipment (Kabar, 18.05.2020).
- As part of its humanitarian assistance to fraternal nations in the fight against the novel coronavirus, Turkey provided 50 breathing machines to Uzbekistan. The devices were delivered from Istanbul to Tashkent on an Uzbekistan Airways charter flight and transferred to the country's Ministry of Health. Engineers from four large Turkish companies, Arcelik, ASELSAN, Baykar Makine and Biosys, jointly developed the machine's prototype (Anadolu Agency, 22.05.2020).