

THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EU INTEGRATION PROCESS*

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Introduction and Methodological Considerations

■ In the aftermath of the Soviet bloc collapse in the late 1980s, transitions of former member countries to democratic regimes had inherently reckoned gradual developments of civil society formation alongside comprehensive political, social, and economic reforms (Dahrendorf 1990: 100). In retrospect, transitional processes per se in the generic geographical area of South-Eastern Europe had been substantiated in sinuous, syncopated, convulsive, oftentimes reversible phenomena which had either resulted in consolidated democratic regimes or merely counterfeited versions. The Republic of Moldova is one of the most characteristic exemplifications of the latter instantiation. Intrinsically fragile and utterly inconsistent, the Moldovan democratic development phenomenally unveils the characteristic of hybridity manifested as a conjunction between apparently functional procedural democratic mechanisms in conjunction with authoritarian manifestations, feeble civic political participation, and sweeping distrust in political institutions. Since genuine Europeanisation had not permeated the democratic mindset, political behaviors, and institutional forms, the rather mimical and strained democratic practices in Moldova had to cope with the European criteria of political, economic, social, and cultural integration. To exemplify, following the sluggish democratic evolution of the country in the 1990s and the domination of the communist agenda in the 2000s, the euphoric optimism in the aftermath of the Twitter Revolution in 2009 and the meteoric democratic resurgence of the early 2010s collapsed with the infamous 2014 bank fraud and endemic corruption, downgrading Moldova from the “poster child” to the “problem child” of Europe (Rinnert 2013).



Renewed expectations for democratic advancements in the aftermath of the post-2020 elections in Moldova have been consistent with removing the democratic frailties as a guarantor of democratic consolidation. Comprehensive reforms in the areas of governance, rule of law, and eradication of corruption are crucial to democratic stabilization. Without sound improvements of the main indicators of democratic consolidation (i.e., “socialization; institutionalization; structuring; internalization of rules; integration; legalization; diminishing insecurities; delegitimization of non-democratic options; depolarization; developing mutual trust, cooperation, and consensus; stabilization of democratic political culture”) (Plasser–Ullram–Waldrauch 1998: 11–12), speaking about democratic resilience results in downright futility. Moreover, since the proactive engagement of civil society stands for one of the most matter-of-course catalysts of democratic consolidation, the internalization of externally required criteria in the Republic of Moldova would bring the civic dimension of democratic processes to the forefront of authentic transformations, beyond the sordid realities of onerous reforms, empty rhetoric, and tepid implementation of norms. Notwithstanding the imperative of civic commitment to further democratic improvements, democratic consolidation in Moldova could be aptly achieved through sound agency and the awareness of necessary ongoing transformations of political culture in Moldova. For the past three decades, the Republic of Moldova has faced multiple setbacks and breakdowns regarding the formation and impact of civil society in political processes: by and large, civil society’s sustainability and resilience were frequently undermined by lethargy and cynicism, pervasive distrust between citizens and civic organizations, in addition to utter fragmentation, government impressment, and the existence of satellite structures of civic organizations. The overall unreliable agency of civic organizations¹ in Moldova had been further damaged by a lack of expertise, resources, transparency, and accountability (Putină–Brie 2023: 87). The present study attempts to examine the (under)performance of Moldovan civic society organizations in keeping with the most pressing challenges they have to confront in resilient democracies: playing an impactful role in the decision-making process and public policies, government monitoring and surveillance of good governance practices, promotion of civil culture and guidance of mentalities, fostering public awareness on matters of general interest, disseminating reliable information and educating the public opinion, and fostering cooperation and coordination mechanisms through networking strategies.

Methodologically, the present approach derives the functional shortcomings and immaturity of civil society and democracy in Moldova from the assessments and recommendations of the European Union (EU), in compliance with the overall integration criteria the Republic of Moldova must meet. Through all programs, projects, and incentive strategies, the European Union has ultimately envisioned the complementarity between robust and dynamic civil society agency and resilient democratic institutions and practices. Because the present study mirrors both the developments and deficiencies of civil society in Moldova through lucid and prudent



lenses, the guiding research agenda of this investigation purports to (i) examine the stage progresses and missteps of civil society's engagement with political processes in Moldova, and (ii) question the probable inefficiency and inadequacy of EU's strategies in the case of Moldova. For reasons of explanatory relevance, the present study provides an interpretative analysis of the above-mentioned tools by delving into two salient programs of the European Union still in full progress about Moldova: The European Union's Action Plans (henceforth EUAP) for the Republic of Moldova (section three) and the European Union-Moldova Eastern Partnership initiative (section four). The next section (section two) serves as an intermediate problematization of the (mis)connections between civil society and democratic resilience as the strategic prerequisite of the EU integration, while the concluding section further reflects on i) the gaps that have constantly obstructed the emergence of democratic resilience in Moldova, and ii) the probability that momentousness of geopolitical priorities could take over democratic reforms and incentive strategies of the EU's integration procedures.

The principled disharmony between civil society and democratic resilience in Moldova. Literature review

Democratic consolidation and the stability of the institutional framework in the Republic of Moldova could have abetted the fortification of civil society: unmistakably, the more consolidated and stable the democratic political regime, the more consistent and autonomous the civil society's posture. Analytically, one could hardly imagine strong democratic institutions and practices in the absence of public pressure on power hubs, the manifestation of anomic attitudes of individuals, and the lack of aggregated civic motivations. Conversely, weak civic participation and non-voluntarism could derive from ominous political culture and antidemocratic mentalities (internally), and mischievous political obstructions of undemocratic regimes which impede upon legitimate civic will and actions (externally). The case of Moldova aptly exemplifies the contradictory democratic practices and the defective civil society engagement with the political.

Holistic and heuristic evaluations of democratic offshoot in Moldova irresolutely vacillate between depictions in terms of - from the worst to the most positive - "captured state" (Cașu 2015; Marandici 2021), "authoritarian consolidation" (Way 2003), "failed" (Crowther 2023) or "flawed" (Economist Intelligence 2022) democracy, "democratic backsliding" (Knott 2018), "hybrid democracy" (Pavliuc-Buga 2022). In the chorus of European countries' aspirations for a commonly shared set of values and norms in the public sphere, Moldova voiced its vicious and onerous partaking in the misleading manner of "Potemkin Europeanisation" (Mikulova 2014), with façade maneuvers of political elites to concoct democratic simulacra to respond to European criteria. Competing oligarchic elites sharing a pervasive authoritarian mindset, frequent political and institutional deadlocks, severe iden-



tity and territorial fractures (Gagauzia and Transnistria), state capture, partisan court rulings, money laundering, clientelism, and citizens' impoverished situation – among other circumstantial causes – have thwarted democratic consolidation and resilience in Moldova. Under such troubling circumstances, democratic resilience had remained just a fancy terminology of the lofty vocabulary of Brussels officials, applicable to substantial democratic arrangements. Understood as “the ability to prevent substantial regression in the quality of democratic institutions and practices” (Boese; Edgell; Hellmeier; Maerz and Lindberg 2021: 886), democratic resilience turns operational when the structure of the democratic framework successfully resists attempts to autocratization. Corrupt political administrations in Moldova coupled with the absence of judicial constraints on the grave misdemeanors of the executive, on the one hand, and the weak civic education and pervasive distrust in political leaders, on the other, have been enabling factors of democratic resilience erosion and autocratization hardening (Lührmann 2021: 1017-1018). Moreover, since democratic resilience points to the institutional capacity to move over disturbances, shocks, and impositions so that it “enables transformation but prevents systemic change” (Merkel 2023: 1), the fragile democratic layout in Moldova could hardly meet the resilience desideratum, given the state's repeated stalemates and malfunctions.

Democratic resilience conceptually implies smooth recovery in the aftermath of crisis de-escalation; chiefly adaptable and dynamic, resilient democracies rely on consolidated institutions and vigilant civil societies, intelligently structured as “multidimensional dynamic spaces” able to respond to various contingencies (Hummel 2020: 55). In Moldova, the vigilance and responsiveness of civil society in confronting political, economic, and societal shocks have been inconclusive and sporadic at best. The enthusiastic resurgence of the democratic ethos after the Twitter revolution drastically downturned in 2014 in the context of the stupefying bank fraud and the thoroughgoing discreditation of leading political figures Vlad Filat and Vlad Plahotniuc. Even if the ensuing civic protests and non-governmental entities' pressures on the political elites had led to nothing immediately, the momentary public fervor had the merit of setting the framework and instilling the spirit of the post-2019 anti-corruption electoral agendas. After 2016, during Pavel Filip's government, the EU urged the Moldovan authorities to refurbish the National Council for Participation by enabling thirty civil society leading representatives to participate effectively in decision-making processes, in keeping with the first recommendation of the 2017 EU-Moldova Association Council (Baltag–Burmester 2022: 495-496). This initiative complemented other salient legislative and programmatic moves to enhance the role of civil society in Moldova: The Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (2016), the Civil Society Development Strategy 2018-2020, the Law on Non-Commercial Organizations (2020) and the Law on Local Action Groups (2021). Consequently, while the political action to boost the impact of civil society has become incremental, the role of civic groups and organizations is still expected to generate substantial results, beyond blatant discontent and advocacy-based initiatives.



Another detrimental factor to democratic and civil society developments in Moldova is the considerable level of Russophilia and Soviet nostalgia. Unmistakably, in addition to its complicated bureaucratic procedures and rather inadequate means and incentives to induce democratic consolidation in Moldova, the EU has constantly had to win ‘the hearts and minds’ of Moldovans for democratic ends in a pervasively competitive atmosphere with Russia’s version of ‘democracy’. The rhetorical and propagandistic clashes notwithstanding, the ‘battlefields’ – whereby the two models of democracy have collided - are the corruption of the political sphere, the media sphere, and the religious stumping grounds. Purportedly, the civil society groups and organizations in Moldova – under the guidance and financing of the EU – could have played the upper hand in fighting the battle for democracy with Russia by taking on action-based approaches instead of advocacy-based attitudes, issue-based instead of project-based initiatives promoted mainly by EU, community centers and civic hubs funding instead of government funding, and quality-driven media investments to counteract the sweeping Russian propaganda (Boulègue; Lutsevych and Marin 2018: 40–41). Moreover, to obstruct democratic consolidation and resilience in Moldova, the Russian autocracy decisively influenced the administrative organization of Moldova in raions which were counterproductive to local decentralization and robust governance (Quinlan 2004). With all its benevolent agendas and incentives, the EU has not managed yet to effect durable changes in the field of democracy implementation in the Republic of Moldova. A more clear-cut impact of civil society organizations would have been consistent with sizable social learning effects (attitudes and mentalities), public sphere effects (agendas, implementation, monitoring, proposals), and institutional effects (representation inputs and reforms) (Badescu; Sum and Uslaner 2004: 3–4). To illustrate the disharmony between civil society development and democratic resilience in Moldova, the next two sections propose an analytical examination of both the achievements and the shortcomings of the two germane programs of the EU still in progress in Moldova, i.e., the EU Action Plans for the Republic of Moldova (EUAP) and the EU-Moldova Eastern Partnership (EaP), respectively.

Interpretative analysis, track one: EUAP

2003 and 2004 were crucial years and turning beacons for the integration aspirations of Moldova into the European Concert of Nations. The November 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia prompted the EU to react and launch the European Neighbourhood Policy (henceforth ENP). One year later, in 2004, three decisive events further impacted the more and more geographical proximity and realist prospects regarding the future of EU-Moldova entanglements: the NATO borders reached Moldova due to Romania’s accession on April 2, 2004, the EU’s significant expansion included ten new members on May 1, 2004, and the Orange Revolution of November 2004 in Ukraine stirred renewed democratic passions and reform



trends. In full consideration of the promising regional upturns in the former member states of the Soviet Union, the EU and Moldova signed the EU-Moldova Action Plan in Brussels, on February 22, 2005.

The Action Plan was largely tailored to the ENP framework. In retrospect, the EUAP conspicuously rested on the core concepts of socialization and institutionalization through incentive-based normative selection and adaptation of rules and values, rather than the surveillance-based approach grounded on punishment and conditionality. Abstract references to common values in the areas of politics, security, society, economy, and culture prevailed in the 2005 EUAP and left the more pragmatic issues of deliverables and conditionalities rather unaddressed. By and large, the EUAP originally mirrored the geopolitical intentions and embedded meanings of the concept of 'neighborhood' and deceitfully eschewed specific references to further enlargement by including the integration of the Republic of Moldova. This precarious conduct of the EU had the effect of humdrum agency in Moldova and subsequently generated swindled expectations, bothersome frustrations, utter disorientation, on-the-ground underperformance, and conflicting prospects (Lynch 2005: 33–43). Any attempt to lucidly reassess the EUAP would have to keep tabs on the 2002 programmatic speech of Romano Prodi at the European Commission wittily articulated in the framework of the 'ring of friends' nascent geopolitical jargon. To illustrate these preliminary critical remarks on the EUAPs, the present focus entails a brief descriptive analysis of the content meanings associated with civil society and democratic developments in Moldova within the last three EAPs for the years 2013–2016, 2017–2020, and 2021–2024, respectively.

The EUAP 2013–2016 (November 15, 2013) mentioned civil society eleven times, with references to democratic resilience virtually absent. In full acknowledgment of democratic frailties and dysfunctional institutionalism, the EUAP 2013–2016 provided recommendations about democratic proceduralism, mainly on issues of constitutional and electoral mechanisms' implementation, observation, and monitoring (Council of Europe 2013: 7). The document ascribed foremost commitments of Moldovan civil society in the areas of freedom of expression, media ownership, and promotion of pluralism (Council of Europe 2013: 22), whilst non-governmental organizations were expected to take an active stance in decentralization processes and capacity building (Council of Europe 2013: 35). Unfortunately, EUAP 2013–2016 for Moldova did not explicitly delve into mechanisms of coordination and cooperation between the aforementioned entities, nor did it incentivize or establish conditionalities for achieving specific goals. The basic drawback of the program was the EU's nonchalance in taking for granted the commitment and efficacy of the Moldovan government in carrying out the rather inconsistent vocabulary circumventing the recommendations. Stupefyingly enough, Appendix 2 of the program mentioned only media associations and civic defenders of human rights alongside other 24 governmental stakeholders expected to effectively contribute to the implementation of the program. Ominously, the corrupt governmental stakeholders either channeled the money to specialized political clientele or implemented



façade programs. Learning the lesson of utter mismanagement and corruptness on the part of the Moldovan government, the Council of Europe more cautiously considered transferring the results-based approach to future action plans.

By the time of the issuing of EUAP 2017-2020 (January 17, 2017), the EU and the Republic of Moldova had already signed the Association Agreement on June 27, 2014. Accordingly, EUAP's 2017-2020 agenda was framed to work contiguously with the Association Agreement provisions and was purportedly designed to respond to technicalities. Monitoring mechanisms and experts' recommendations and reports notwithstanding, the EUAP 2017-2020 could be assessed as self-contradictorily balanced: more than half of the one-page executive summary of the document contains farfetched eulogistic remarks on the undeniable progress and improvements regarding the status of democratic reforms in Moldova and the monitoring capacities of civil society in electoral processes. However, the concluding paragraph returns to a more lucid assessment, specifically stating that "continued political crisis... [and the] challenges to complete reforms lie mainly with lack of public trust in the judicial system, lack of transparency and accountability of the political process, wide-spread corruption, inefficient public administration at central and local levels and insufficient institutional capacity..." (Council of Europe 2017: 2). Frequently mentioning 'public awareness' as the sine-qua-non condition for enhancing the cooperation with the EU in legislative convergence, EUAP 2017-2020 inconclusively acknowledged the lessons learned from the previous action plan, generically pointing to further revision of legislation, democratic governance, rule of law, human rights, comprehensive reforms, and sustainable change (Council of Europe 2017: 24). The last entry that mentions sustainability as a necessary improvement purportedly suggests a change of accent from consolidation to resilience, albeit in inexplicit terms.

At the apex of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, EUAP 2021-2024 (November 19, 2020) took on more specific and innovative approaches in comparison to the previous action plans. Less encomiastic and allegedly strategic, the new program also considered the National Development Strategy (Moldova 2030) and the global United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Consequently, the new document carefully acknowledged the "resilience of communities to emergencies" with the proactive role of civil society organizations (Council of Europe 2020: 27). The enhancement of civic engagement with political processes took on more specific issues such as "fighting drug abuse and illicit trafficking in drugs, protection of human rights in the health sector and addressing new challenges linked to the COVID-19 pandemic", social dialogue, counter-trafficking in human beings, protection of rights of women and children, gender equality, antidiscrimination, education for digital citizenship, and internet governance (Council of Europe 2020: 2, 30-37). In addition, the concept of democratic security - which is expected to become the cornerstone of future EU-Moldova cooperation mechanisms - would be effectively achieved through enhanced implementation of European legal norms, institutional acquis, and anticorruption punishment. With the probable prospect



of a frozen conflict in Ukraine, in the context of the hybrid stratagems used by Russia to diffuse democratic imbalances and generate instability and the crucial energy sustainability of Moldova, the focus on resilience and securitization will grow rampant, even more since Moldova has been granted candidate status on June 23, 2022. The final reports on EUAP 2021-2024 will probably reveal more effective implementation considering Maia Sandu's presidential commitment to align Moldova to European standards and the integration hopes with its promises in sight.

Interpretative analysis, track two: EaP

As the Rose Revolution in Georgia propelled the signing of EUAPs for sustainable growth under the slogan "better regulation, better funding, and better knowledge", another massive public outburst, the 2009 Twitter Revolution in Moldova, was an important catalyst for the adoption of the Eastern Partnership (May 7, 2009, henceforth EaP), which primordially responded to the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008. Between the incentive-based EUAPs and the launching of the EaP, the Republic of Moldova looked for regional integration and cooperation, firstly within the foreign policy instrument of the ENP, and subsequently within the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe and its extensions (RCC, SEEC, CEFTA). Less effective in matters of internal political concerns (i.e., democratic consolidation, rule of law, reforms) and more pragmatic about prompt incentives (i.e., visa-free travel program, DCFTA), the EaP probably remains the most geopolitically articulated agenda grounded on the core concepts of stability, sustainability, and resilience. Moreover, in retrospect, the EaP seemingly worked according to the logic of the integration approach, from neighborhood through association (Akhvlediani 2022: 225). However, since the process of integration is far from its conclusive goal, the EaP is still worthy of timely assessments and anticipative revisions under contingent circumstances.

The EaP retained some basic provisions characteristically associated with the EUAPs at the time of its launching at the 2009 Prague Summit, even if the stability and security dimensions were the main targets. Democratic governance, economic integration and convergence, energy security, and people-to-people contacts were envisioned as fundamental provisions to be met by the six partner states (Popșoi 2021: 125). The latter provision pointed to civil society and Moldova took several steps to meet the EaP respective target by creating specific civic platforms and programs, such as the National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum, the EU-Moldova Civil Society Association Platform, the EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in the Republic of Moldova, the EaP Civil Society Facility, and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. The overall agenda of the EaP regarding the resilience of civil society in Moldova was framed to foster sustainability through compelling legislation, coordination through capacity building, and



cooperation through funding mechanisms (Balutel 2019: 3-6). Ever since the 2009 Prague Summit, the Republic of Moldova has experienced ups and downs, rendering the EaP programs as inefficient as the EUAPs. The forward-looking enthusiasm ahead of the 2013 EaP in Vilnius, whereby Moldova was appraised as the most committed member of the EaP (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2017) wavered down in the troubling contexts of the Russian occupation of Crimea and the internal fraud scandal in 2014 so that the 2015 EaP Summit in Riga found Moldova amid deeper crises. Since the situation had not changed for the better after the 2016 presidential elections, at the 2017 Brussels EaP Summit the Moldovan delegation tried to use the geopolitical argument to endorse the country's strategic positioning within the EaP membership. Acknowledging the EaP frailties, the EU moved to stricter enforcement of the conditionality principle, roughly between 2015–2018, by suspending government funding and redirecting grants to sound local and regional programs, and media independence, respectively (Groza 2019: 50). Growing disappointment with the poor results in the implementation of the EaP programs and the Association Agreement stipulations during the democratic backsliding of 2016–2019 in the Republic of Moldova, the European officials made a strategic move, pragmatically replacing the vocabulary of democratic consolidation and reforms with the more prudent concept of resilience to conflict and crises challenges. The EaP agenda ostensibly reveals its ambiguousness when assessing the EaP Index variables, precisely because of the impractical postulation of democratic development's specific targets and elusive references to integration-specific demands (Brie–Putină 2023: 167-171). The urgency of geopolitical interests supersedes the EU's incentive-based and conditionality stances, rendering the EaP agenda obsolete and ineffective. Accurate multilevel analyses would also reveal the poor coordination between a plethora of programs carried out under the EaP, the Eastern Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) 2014–2020, and the Association Agreement agenda after 2014. Instead of robust coordination mechanisms and proactive stances in confronting the implementation mechanisms, the EU's overall strategies proved rather reactive and/ or pre-emptive in its approaches (Cenușa 2019: 6–13).

The post-2020 pandemic crisis and the prolonged Russian aggression of Ukraine after 2022 will further enhance the EU's strategic postures of sustainability, securitization, and resilience. Recent research on the enforcement of crisis policies in line with the EaP agreement suggests that the PAS Government in Moldova should abandon the lofty normativism and value-based approach of the integration process and embark on a more pragmatic positioning grounded on temporary "rational authoritarianism" (Minzarari 2022: 4) to achieve rapid and substantial goals. The March 2020 document of EaP policy 'Reinforcing Resilience – An EaP that Delivers for All' enumerated four salient dimensions of democratic capacity to confront deep crises: rule of law and security resilience, environment and climate resilience, digital resilience, and inclusive society resilience. At the societal level, the post-2020 EaP agenda 'Together for Resilient, Gender-Equal, Fair and Inclusive Societies' set its resilience priority on human rights and social justice. In keeping



with the EaP agenda, the EU's 2021 document 'Joint Staff Working Document – Recovery, Resilience, and Reform: Post-2020 Eastern Partnership Priorities' further specified the evaluation variables and deliverables, so that, one year later, the project team Civic Eastern Partnership Tracker: Monitoring EaP Targets, Deliverables, and Related Reforms analyzed the post-2020 above-mentioned agenda and issued its first comprehensive report. The number of entries specifically pointing at the five member countries of the EaP (minus Belarus) in the report is the poorest in the case of Moldova, even if the country has made the most consistent moves in the adaptation of legislation in comparison to the other four states. The final resolution of November 16, 2023, recommended the immediate opening of negotiation procedures with Ukraine and Moldova and granting the candidate status to Georgia, under the intractable regional and geopolitical context of the war in Ukraine (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2023).

Coda. Geopolitical security-based resilience or democratic and civil society resilience?

From the standpoint of democratic theory, for the past three decades, the specious transition to democracy in the 1990s followed by the utterly convulsive and flawed democratic consolidation of the next two decades in Moldova has been the inescapable result of three major incongruences and divisive factors: the cultural gap, the administrative gap, and the political gap, respectively. *The cultural gap* speaks volumes about the residual communist and collectivistic mentalities, paternalistic government conduct and oligarchic understanding of power politics, overwhelming corruption of political elites and the public sphere, and the virtual suffocation of civil society and public opinion. In line with the remarks of the present study, the democratic (political) culture had to be built from scratch and the civil society could have only miraculously been articulated as a positive and effective entity under the adverse cultural background. The path to a consolidated and resilient democratic regime in Moldova has had to face basic distrust, pervasive lethargy, and attitudinal cynicism on the part of both the elites and the ordinary citizens, and the full achievement of steady features of democratic culture is still a work in progress. Both the political and the civil societies in Moldova should have probably committed to democratic consolidation not only in full earnestness but also by taking on a more voluntaristic stance: instead of static and mimical compliance with the EU's incentives and agendas, the political and especially the civil society should have been more dynamic and adaptive, and actively contest, negotiate, accommodate, and modify the European regulations according to practical contexts. In this way, democratic arrangements and civil society in Moldova would have been installed due to internalized awareness and responsible engagement. *The administrative gap* is consistent with capacity building and organizational culture reforms, restructuring, removing bureaucratic hindrances, and reform-oriented determination.



Unfortunately, the far-reaching corruption of the administrative apparatus coupled with incoherent legislation and implementation mechanisms have drastically obstructed and delayed democratic consolidation in the Republic of Moldova. Additionally, in some cases, the administrative gap was amplified by insurmountable misunderstandings in the areas of coordination and cooperation between the EU and Moldova, generating disbelief, irritation, and functional stalemates. Moreover, the incentive-based strategy of the European Union and the funding missteps went utterly wrong and effectively blocked germane reforms. It took quite a long time to European officials to realize that the preferential allocation of money to governmental stakeholders in Moldova was simply a waste of resources; a 2014 report strongly revealed that even if the EU had shifted its funding strategy to privilege civil society and non-governmental initiatives (covering 80–90% of total funds), financial sustainability, civic engagement, and voluntary enthusiasm still remain volatile in Moldova (Chiriac–Țugui 2014: 36). *The political gap* stands for an overarching concept that includes institutional development, behavioural and participative change of attitudes, electoral processes transparency, alignment to practices of good governance, pluralist and diversity acknowledgement, rule of law and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms; in context, the specific difference between the political and the administrative is explanatory for the distinction between procedural and decision-making mechanisms of the political, and the enforcement/ implementation of policies specific to administrative activities, respectively. As a matter of principle, the Copenhagen criteria for the accession of a new member state into the EU do not specifically address the abovementioned distinction, and professedly integrate the administrative into the political criteria. The previous analytical considerations on civil society and democratic resilience in the Republic of Moldova mainly recapitulated the overall political examination of shortcomings and achievements in the process of European integration; recently, the European Commission's opinion on the Republic of Moldova's application for membership of the EU added economic, social and financial resilience recommendations, especially concerning the energy and refugee crises in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the area of civil society, the European Commission urged the Moldovan government to conduct "a systematic public consultation procedure" on all relevant integration issues (European Commission 2022: 3–5).

Pushing forward the European integration of Ukraine and Moldova compels the EU to look upon its status as a real geopolitical actor and security guarantor of regional resilience against the destabilizing maneuvers of Russia. The commendable priority of securitization will become the cornerstone of democratic resilience (Corpădean 2023: 49) and power constraints (Borza 2022: 14) will probably prevail over normative and prescriptive procedures, rendering the accession criteria expeditious and more flexible. Having Russia in their immediate geographic proximity (i.e., in the case of Moldova, the breakaway territory of Transnistria stands as a Russian form of border control), both Ukraine and Moldova must confront the unfathomable geopolitical gap whereby the democratic and civil society resilience

would be consistent with their capacities to defend the European liberal model of democracy against the sovereigntist and autocratic Russian variety. Consequently, the EU's prevailing interest in security-based resilience could pragmatically obscure consolidation, modernization, reformism, and defense of democratic norms and values. The new challenges of geopolitical resilience (i.e., the intelligence competition, cybersecurity, and strengthening defense capabilities) will coerce the EU to turn more and more proactive, first and foremost by granting a "security compact" (Wilson 2022: 14) to both Ukraine and Moldova.

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Note

¹ The present study uses the concept of civil society in accordance to the most widespread scholarly acceptations. Notably, Charles Taylor generically defined civil society as a “web of autonomous associations, independent of the state which bonds citizens together in matters of common concern, and by their existence for action could have an effect on public policy” (Taylor 1990). Mark Howard provided a more accurate analytical definition of civil society as „the community of citizens, who come together and associate within the public “space” that is distinct from the individual, family, and friendship networks, on the one hand, and the state and market, on the other. This space consists of intermediary groups, organizations, and associations that are formally established, legally protected, autonomously run, and voluntarily joined by ordinary citizens.” (Howard 2002). Furthermore, this investigation does not operate with specific distinctions between civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations which could be further classified to include advocacy entities, voluntary groups, non-profit organisations, associations, foundations, local and community interest groups.