

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
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ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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**"The European Integration of the Republic of Moldova
in the Context of Geopolitical Competition between the
European Union and the Russian Federation"**

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SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

"The European Integration of the Republic of Moldova in the Context of Geopolitical Competition between the European Union and the Russian Federation"

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Introduction

This research examines the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the context of geopolitical competition between the European Union (EU) and the Russian Federation. It is based on the premise that this process cannot be understood solely through the lens of legislative harmonisation or compliance with the accession criteria but rather must be analysed within a broader framework that integrates geopolitical, institutional, economic, security, and societal dimensions. The thesis argues that European integration constitutes a political, legal, institutional, and strategic process simultaneously shaped by both the Republic of Moldova's domestic developments and the transformations of the regional and international environment. The research traces the evolution of relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union following the country's independence, examining the main stages of its rapprochement with the European community—from the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership to the signing of the Association Agreement, the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), and the granting of EU candidate status. Particular attention is devoted to the developments following 2022, when the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine fundamentally reshaped the European security architecture and the European Union's enlargement policy, thereby accelerating the Republic of Moldova's European integration trajectory. The thesis also analyses the mechanisms through which the Russian Federation seeks to influence the Republic of Moldova's strategic orientation by employing political, economic, energy, informational, and hybrid instruments. It examines the country's structural vulnerabilities, including energy dependence, the Transnistrian conflict, political and societal polarisation, disinformation campaigns, and the influence of external actors on democratic processes. Within this context, the research highlights the importance of strengthening both institutional and societal resilience, as well as the role of information

security and administrative capacity in supporting the European integration process. From a methodological perspective, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach characteristic of international relations, geopolitics, European studies, and security studies. The analysis combines qualitative and comparative methods, documentary and politico-institutional analysis, and empirical research based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted with experts, representatives of public institutions, academia, civil society, and the media sector. This approach makes it possible to connect theoretical foundations with practical developments and provides a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between internal and external factors shaping the Republic of Moldova's European trajectory. The research findings confirm the hypothesis that the acceleration of the European integration process after 2022 has been driven both by the strategic paradigm shift within the European Union and by the need to strengthen security and stability in the Eastern neighbourhood. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the success of the accession process depends not only on fulfilling the political and legal criteria established by the European Union but also on the Republic of Moldova's capacity to implement sustainable structural reforms, strengthen the rule of law, improve public administration, and reduce vulnerabilities generated by external influence and hybrid threats. The thesis demonstrates that European integration should be understood as a comprehensive process of state and societal transformation, encompassing the modernisation of public institutions, the consolidation of democracy, the development of a competitive economy, and the strengthening of national resilience in the face of contemporary geopolitical challenges. In this regard, the implementation of the EU acquis represents not only an obligation arising from the accession process but also an essential instrument for strengthening democratic governance, improving the effectiveness of public policies, and bringing the Republic of Moldova closer to European standards. The contributions of this research are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study develops an analytical framework that integrates geopolitical competition with the process of Europeanisation. Practically, it formulates policy recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing democratic resilience, countering disinformation, and improving the implementation of reforms required for accession to the European Union. The findings may serve as a valuable resource for public authorities, policymakers, the academic community, and European partners engaged in

supporting the Republic of Moldova's European integration, while also contributing to broader academic and policy debates on the future of EU enlargement and the Eastern neighbourhood.

Research Aim, Objectives, and Research Questions

The primary aim of this research is to explain how the geopolitical competition between the European Union and the Russian Federation influences the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova and to identify the mechanisms through which this competition shapes the country's political, institutional, economic, and security transformations. The research is based on the premise that European integration should not be understood solely as a technical process of legislative and institutional harmonisation with the *acquis* of the European Union, but rather as a complex process of strategic transformation taking place within a regional environment characterised by geopolitical rivalry, hybrid threats, and profound changes in the European security architecture. To achieve this aim, the research pursues a set of specific objectives that enable a multidimensional analysis of the Republic of Moldova's European trajectory. The first objective is to establish the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the geopolitical competition between the European Union and the Russian Federation and to examine the relevance of the principal paradigms of international relations for interpreting developments in Eastern Europe. The second objective is to analyse the evolution of relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, from the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership to the granting of EU candidate status and the launch of accession negotiations. The research also evaluates the mechanisms of EU conditionality and their impact on the political, administrative, and institutional reforms implemented in the Republic of Moldova. Particular attention is devoted to the manner in which the Europeanisation process has contributed to strengthening the legal framework, enhancing administrative capacity, and promoting institutional convergence with European standards. A further objective is to identify and assess the instruments through which the Russian Federation exerts influence over the Republic of Moldova. In this respect, the research examines the political, economic, energy, informational, and security dimensions of external influence by analysing the impact of structural dependencies, the Transnistrian conflict, disinformation campaigns, and other forms of hybrid warfare on democratic stability and the continuity of the

country's European integration process. The research also seeks to analyse the impact of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine on the European Union's enlargement policy and on the Republic of Moldova's European integration process. It examines the changes that have occurred in the European security architecture, the redefinition of the European Union's strategic priorities, and the implications of these developments for accelerating accession negotiations and strengthening cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the European institutions. Another important objective is to assess the domestic reforms and institutional capacity required for implementing the obligations arising from the EU accession process. The analysis focuses on public administration reform, the strengthening of the rule of law, judicial reform, the development of institutional coordination mechanisms, and the enhancement of administrative capacity for implementing the EU acquis. At the same time, the research analyses the institutional and societal vulnerabilities that may affect the pace and effectiveness of the European integration process. Based on these objectives, the research is structured around several fundamental research questions designed to address the principal theoretical and practical challenges of the Republic of Moldova's European integration process:

- *To what extent does the geopolitical competition between the European Union and the Russian Federation influence the Republic of Moldova's strategic orientation and European trajectory?*
- *What are the principal mechanisms through which the European Union and the Russian Federation project their political, economic, and security influence in Eastern Europe, and particularly in the Republic of Moldova?*
- *How can the institutional resilience and administrative capacity of the Republic of Moldova be strengthened in order to ensure the effective implementation of the reforms required for accession to the European Union?*

The research further examines the role of European conditionality, the effects of hybrid threats on democratic processes, the impact of regional transformations on the EU enlargement policy, and the contribution of domestic reforms to strengthening the Republic of Moldova's European path. The research findings demonstrate the multidimensional nature of the European integration process and confirm that its success depends not only on the consistent implementation of domestic reforms and the effective application of the EU acquis, but also on

strengthening the rule of law, administrative capacity, and both institutional and societal resilience in the face of geopolitical pressures and hybrid threats. Furthermore, the research validates the proposed hypotheses by demonstrating that the transformations triggered after 2022 have accelerated the Republic of Moldova's accession process and have endowed European integration with a strategic security dimension carrying significant implications for the European Union's enlargement policy and for the stability of the entire Eastern European region.

Research Methodology

This research is grounded in an interdisciplinary methodological approach characteristic of the fields of international relations, geopolitics, European studies, and security studies, with the objective of analysing the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the geopolitical competition between the European Union and the Russian Federation.

The complexity of the research topic required the adoption of an analytical, explanatory, and interpretative research design capable of capturing both the external dimension of geopolitical competition and the institutional, political, and societal transformations generated by the European Union accession process. The methodological framework combines theoretical analysis with empirical research, relying primarily on qualitative methods, complemented by comparative analysis and politico-institutional analysis. The research is based on the systematic examination of an extensive body of academic and institutional sources, including scholarly literature in the fields of international relations, geopolitics, and European integration; the European Union's founding documents; relevant treaties and agreements; the European Commission's reports on the Republic of Moldova; national strategies; public policy documents; as well as reports prepared by international organisations and specialised research institutions. The documentary analysis is complemented by the comparative method, which enables an assessment of the Republic of Moldova's development in relation to other Eastern Partnership countries pursuing European Union membership. This approach facilitates the identification of similarities and differences concerning the mechanisms of Europeanisation, the application of EU conditionality, the development of administrative capacity, and the

management of geopolitical and institutional vulnerabilities. The empirical component of the research is based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted with experts in international relations, representatives of public administration, security specialists, journalists, and representatives of civil society organizations. These methods made it possible to obtain an in-depth understanding of issues related to external influence, information security, disinformation, institutional resilience, and perceptions of the European integration process. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative research techniques, particularly thematic analysis and discourse analysis, thereby contributing to the validation of the conclusions derived from the theoretical framework and documentary analysis. From a conceptual perspective, the research integrates complementary perspectives drawn from the principal theories of international relations. Realism provides the analytical tools necessary to understand geopolitical competition and the strategic interests of the actors involved, whereas constructivism facilitates the analysis of the identity-based, normative, and institutional dimensions of the European integration process.

This theoretical framework is further complemented by the theory of European conditionality and the Europeanisation literature, which explain the mechanisms through which the European Union influences the domestic reforms of candidate countries. In addition, the study draws upon contemporary approaches to state resilience, societal security, and hybrid threats in order to provide a comprehensive explanation of the challenges facing the Republic of Moldova. The adopted methodology allows for an integrated examination of the relationship between geopolitical competition, domestic reforms, and the European Union accession process, highlighting the interdependencies between the external and internal dimensions of the transformations currently taking place in the Republic of Moldova. The research demonstrates that the country's European trajectory is determined not only by compliance with the political and legal criteria established by the European Union, but also by the capacity of national institutions to implement sustainable reforms, strengthen the rule of law, and respond effectively to external pressures and hybrid threats. The research findings confirm the validity of the proposed hypotheses and highlight the multidimensional character of the European integration process, demonstrating that the success of accession depends upon the interaction between European conditionality, domestic political will, administrative capacity, institutional

resilience, and societal support for the implementation of the necessary reforms. Furthermore, the research formulates practical recommendations aimed at strengthening public administration, enhancing coordination mechanisms for the European integration process, countering disinformation, and reinforcing democratic resilience. In doing so, it contributes both to the advancement of the academic literature and to the development of evidence-based public policies designed to accelerate the Republic of Moldova's accession to the European Union.

Chapter I

The first chapter establishes the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research by providing the analytical tools necessary for understanding the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the geopolitical competition between the European Union and the Russian Federation. It examines the principal paradigms of international relations—Realism, Constructivism, the theory of EU conditionality, the theory of Europeanisation, as well as classical and critical approaches to geopolitics—highlighting their relevance for interpreting developments in Eastern Europe.

The chapter further develops the concepts of external influence, state resilience, normative power, soft power, sharp power, and societal security, demonstrating that European integration constitutes a complex process of institutional and political transformation that extends well beyond legislative harmonization. At the same time, it argues for the necessity of strengthening the Republic of Moldova's administrative and institutional capacity in order to ensure the effective implementation of the EU acquis and to manage geopolitical pressures and hybrid threats.

Finally, the chapter establishes the analytical model employed throughout the dissertation and identifies the principal explanatory variables shaping the Republic of Moldova's European integration trajectory.

Chapter II

The second chapter analyses the evolution of relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, beginning with the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership and continuing through the signing of the Association Agreement, the

implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), the granting of EU candidate status, and the launch of accession negotiations.

The chapter examines the mechanisms of European conditionality and the manner in which they have influenced the reform process and the Republic of Moldova's gradual alignment with European Union standards. The analysis highlights both the achievements and the limitations of the Eastern Partnership, demonstrating that it represented a transitional stage towards the prospect of EU membership without initially providing a political guarantee of future enlargement.

The chapter further demonstrates that the war in Ukraine fundamentally reshaped the European Union's enlargement policy and accelerated the Republic of Moldova's European integration process by transforming security considerations into a central component of accession.

Chapter III

The third chapter is devoted to the evolution of the Republic of Moldova's relations with both the European Union and the Russian Federation, examining them from political, economic, and institutional perspectives while identifying the factors that have shaped their dynamics and influenced the country's strategic orientation.

Particular attention is devoted to trade, energy, and investment interdependencies and to their impact on the strategic choices of the Moldovan state. The analysis demonstrates that the Republic of Moldova has been required to manage simultaneously its gradual integration into the European Union and its historical dependencies on the Russian Federation, creating significant challenges for both the reform process and the country's foreign policy orientation.

The chapter further highlights the transformations that followed the implementation of the Association Agreement, including the diversification of economic relations, the strengthening of cooperation with the European Union, and the gradual reduction of the Republic of Moldova's traditional dependencies on the Russian Federation.

Chapter IV

The fourth chapter is devoted to analyzing the mechanisms through which the Russian Federation projects its influence over the Republic of Moldova. It examines economic and

energy pressures, the use of natural resources as instruments of political influence, the Transnistrian conflict, as well as the informational dimension and strategic communication. The research demonstrates that the Russian Federation's influence extends beyond the traditional instruments of foreign policy and encompasses a complex set of hybrid mechanisms adapted to the evolving geopolitical environment. The chapter further argues that reducing structural vulnerabilities and strengthening energy independence constitute essential preconditions for enhancing national security and ensuring the successful implementation of the Republic of Moldova's European integration process.

Chapter V

The fifth chapter examines the transformation of the Republic of Moldova's security environment in the context of the war in Ukraine and the intensification of regional geopolitical competition. It analyses hybrid threats, propaganda and disinformation campaigns, vulnerabilities within the media environment, and their impact on democratic processes and public opinion.

A distinctive feature of this chapter is the incorporation of empirical research based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted with experts and media representatives. The findings confirm the existence of significant informational vulnerabilities and underline the need to develop public policies aimed at strengthening institutional resilience, promoting media literacy, and countering disinformation.

The chapter argues that information security has become an indispensable component of both national security and the Republic of Moldova's European integration process.

Chapter VI

The sixth chapter focuses on the analysis of public administration reform, judicial reform, and the development of state institutions within the context of the European Union accession process. It examines how the implementation of EU conditionality contributes to strengthening the rule of law, modernizing public administration, and increasing the effectiveness of the institutions responsible for transposing and implementing the EU acquis. The chapter also identifies the principal challenges related to administrative capacity, institutional coordination, and the human resources required to manage the accession process effectively. It demonstrates that the success of accession negotiations depends not only on

the adoption of European legislation but also on the actual capacity of public institutions to implement and enforce the agreed reforms.

Chapter VII

The final chapter examines the developments that have taken place since 2022, with particular emphasis on the Republic of Moldova's acquisition of European Union candidate status, the opening of accession negotiations, and the transformation of relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union.

The chapter analyses the legal and institutional framework governing the accession negotiations, highlights Romania's role as the Republic of Moldova's principal advocate for European integration, and evaluates the geopolitical implications of EU enlargement for regional security and for the country's European perspective.

It also explores the democratic dimension of the integration process, including the constitutional referendum on European integration and the parliamentary elections, emphasizing the importance of democratic legitimacy and public support in consolidating the Republic of Moldova's European trajectory.

The chapter concludes that, following 2022, European integration has evolved into a strategic objective extending beyond its purely institutional dimension and has become intrinsically linked to regional security and stability.

Original Contributions of the Research

The originality of this research lies in the development of an integrated analytical model that brings together the geopolitical, institutional, legal, and societal dimensions of the Republic of Moldova's European integration process. The dissertation moves beyond traditional approaches centered exclusively on Europeanisation or international relations by proposing a multidimensional perspective on the interaction between geopolitical competition and the country's internal transformation. A significant contribution of the study is the integration of the consequences of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine into the analysis of the European Union accession process. It demonstrates how the profound changes in the European security architecture have accelerated the Republic of Moldova's European trajectory and redefined the strategic context of EU enlargement. Furthermore, the dissertation incorporates an empirical component based on semi-structured interviews and

focus group discussions, complementing the theoretical analysis with an applied assessment of informational vulnerabilities, institutional resilience, and the challenges associated with implementing the reforms required for accession to the European Union.

General Conclusions

This research set out to analyse the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the geopolitical competition between the European Union and the Russian Federation, based on the premise that this process cannot be explained solely through the implementation of institutional reforms or compliance with the accession criteria. The dissertation argues that European integration should be understood as the outcome of the complex interaction between external geopolitical factors and the internal dynamics of state transformation, which together shape both the pace and the direction of the Republic of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union.

The analysis confirms the central hypothesis of the research and demonstrates that the Republic of Moldova's European trajectory has been simultaneously influenced by developments in the international security environment, the mechanisms of European Union conditionality, and the capacity of national institutions to implement structural reforms and strengthen democratic resilience.

The findings demonstrate that the Republic of Moldova's European integration process has evolved progressively, beginning with cooperation under the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, continuing through the conclusion and implementation of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), and culminating in the granting of European Union candidate status and the opening of accession negotiations.

However, the developments following 2022 constituted a decisive turning point, fundamentally transforming both the European Union's enlargement policy and the Republic of Moldova's geopolitical position. The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought about a paradigm shift in the understanding of European security and demonstrated that enlargement should be regarded not only as an instrument of political and economic integration but also as a strategic mechanism for strengthening stability and security across the European continent.

The research validates the hypothesis that the Russian Federation employs a broad spectrum of political, economic, energy, informational, and hybrid instruments to influence the Republic of Moldova's political processes and strategic orientation. The analysis demonstrates that these mechanisms are intended to preserve structural vulnerabilities, constrain the consolidation of democratic institutions, and impede the country's irreversible integration into the European Union.

At the same time, the study highlights that reducing these vulnerabilities requires coherent public policies aimed at strengthening energy security, developing an efficient public administration, reinforcing informational resilience, and continuously modernising democratic institutions.

The findings further demonstrate that the success of the accession process depends not merely on the formal transposition of the EU *acquis* into national legislation. European integration also requires the strengthening of administrative and institutional capacity, the establishment of effective mechanisms for coordinating reforms, the professionalisation of the civil service, and the enhancement of the state's ability to implement, monitor, and evaluate public policies. From this perspective, the research concludes that institutions constitute the principal factor capable of transforming political commitments into sustainable and measurable outcomes.

An important contribution of the study concerns the relationship between national security and European integration. The analysis demonstrates that, under the current geopolitical circumstances, these two dimensions are profoundly interconnected. Strengthening the Republic of Moldova's security depends upon the development of resilient institutions, the effective countering of disinformation and propaganda, the reduction of economic and energy dependencies, and the expansion of cooperation with the European Union and its Western partners. Consequently, European integration should be understood not only as a foreign policy objective but also as a strategic instrument for strengthening state resilience and safeguarding the democratic order.

The empirical component of the research, based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving experts, representatives of public institutions, academia, civil society, and the media sector, complements the theoretical analysis by confirming the existence of significant vulnerabilities in the fields of information security and strategic

communication. It also reveals a broad consensus regarding the necessity of accelerating institutional reforms and strengthening democratic resilience as essential preconditions for the successful completion of the accession process.

Based on the analyses undertaken, the dissertation demonstrates that the implementation of the EU acquis must be approached as a comprehensive process of structural transformation encompassing both public administration and the wider institutional system. The mere adoption of European legislation is insufficient; what is required is the development of institutions capable of effectively implementing European policies, managing external financial assistance, and ensuring compliance with the principles of the rule of law, transparency, and good governance. From this perspective, strengthening administrative capacity remains one of the most significant challenges facing the accession process.

The research also demonstrates that European integration should be analysed through a multidimensional framework that integrates geopolitical, institutional, economic, legal, and societal dimensions. Recent developments confirm that the success of accession will depend on the Republic of Moldova's capacity to respond simultaneously to the requirements of the European Union and to the challenges arising from regional geopolitical competition. In this context, institutional and societal resilience emerge as decisive factors for the successful completion of the European integration process. From a scientific perspective, this dissertation contributes to the existing body of literature by proposing an integrated analytical model that explains the relationship between geopolitical competition, external influence, and European integration. Its originality lies in combining geopolitical and institutional perspectives within a single analytical framework while incorporating the impact of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine on the European Union's enlargement policy and on the Republic of Moldova's transformation into a strategic actor within the Eastern neighbourhood. From a practical perspective, the conclusions provide a basis for policy recommendations concerning the strengthening of accession coordination mechanisms, the enhancement of administrative capacity, the professionalization of the civil service, the more effective implementation of the EU acquis, the countering of hybrid threats, and the reinforcement of democratic resilience. These recommendations may serve as valuable guidance both for the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in managing the accession process and for the institutions of the European Union in shaping enlargement

policy and support instruments for candidate countries. In conclusion, the research demonstrates that the European integration of the Republic of Moldova represents a strategic process of profound transformation situated at the intersection of domestic reforms and regional geopolitical competition. The future of the country's European path will depend on its ability to continue structural reforms, strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law, develop professional and effective public administration, and enhance societal resilience in the face of external threats. At the same time, the success of this process will be influenced by the continuity of the political and financial support provided by the European Union, as well as by the maintenance of a strong societal consensus in favour of European integration.

Accordingly, the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union should be understood not merely as a foreign policy objective but as a comprehensive national project of modernisation, democratic consolidation, and affirmation of the country's place within the European community of values, security, and prosperity.