

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE ATTITUDES OF ETHNIC GROUPS ON EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN MOLDOVA (2000 – 2008)

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Abstract. *This article** explores the dynamics of public opinion and the attitudes of ethnic groups on European integration in Moldova for the 2000-2008 period. Drawing on data provided by sixteen surveys, it reveals the sociological profile of “Eurooptimists” in Moldova and the hierarchy of demographic parameters based on the extent to which they divide public opinion concerning European integration. The paper finds out that men, persons from rural areas, youth, Moldovans/Romanians, the more educated people and with better life standards are more fervent supporters of European integration of Moldova. It argues also that differences in the education of respondents divide the public opinion in the most abrupt way with regard to the opportunity of European integration of Moldova, while the different genders induce the smallest difference between options of respondents for the “European idea”. The paper suggests that, in practical terms, its findings might be of help to relevant governmental bodies that should consider well-defined targeted information campaigns while promoting the “European idea” in Moldova.*

Keywords: *Public opinion, ethnic groups, European integration, Moldova*

1. Introduction

The experience of the new EU member states has shown how important was the stance of public opinion on their road to the EU. Without the necessary support of the public they would not succeed in promoting multidimensional processes of reforms, and obviously they would not manage to ratify via referenda the accession treaties. The significant public support helped a great deal those countries to make their integration policies success stories. To what extent is the public

opinion ready to play a similar role in Moldova? Is there a necessary public support for the integration policies promoted in recent years by Moldovan governments?

This essay is one of the few research attempts to date addressing in a dedicated way the dynamics of Moldovan public opinion concerning European integration. At the same time, it is the first research undertaking which covers a longer timeframe from 2000 to 2008, and looks at the attitudes of different ethnic groups in Moldova towards European integration. After

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having analysed survey data stratified on six demographic parameters, the paper drawing on this analysis goes further by revealing the sociological profile of “Eurooptimists” in Moldova and the hierarchy of demographic parameters based on the extent to which they divide public opinion concerning European integration. Providing a panorama of public attitudes towards European integration this paper might be useful for further theoretical purposes and in practical terms for targeted information campaigns aiming at increasing public awareness with regard to the EU course of Moldova.

2. Dynamics of Public Opinion on European Integration in Moldova

This section pays attention to the dynamics of Moldovan public opinion on European integration in the 2000-2008 period of time. The approach is based on Barometers of Public Opinion (BPOs) commissioned by the Institute of Public Policy (IPP, 2000-2008). These surveys serve as the basis for analysis for at least three reasons: (1) BPOs measure public adherence to the “European idea” in Moldova; (2) they are conducted systematically, and allow thus identifying the dynamics of public opinion on European integration; and (3) BPOs are relatively complex, detailed and objective.

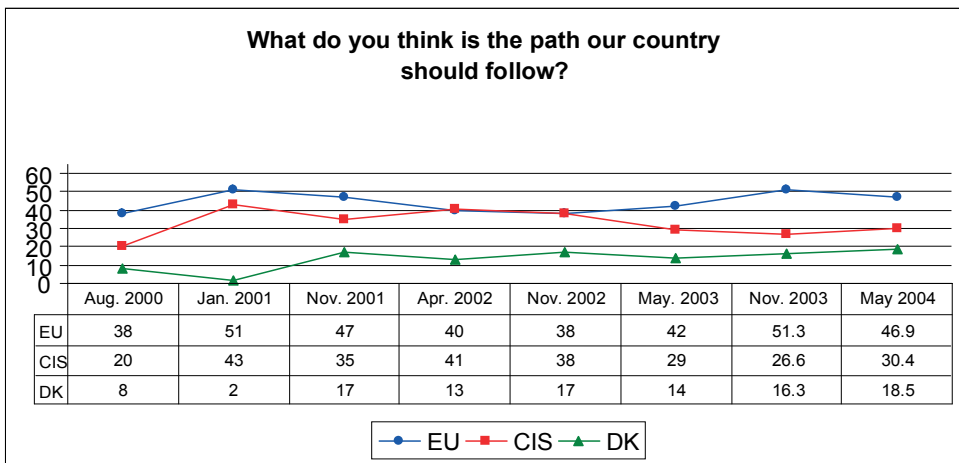
Seventeen BPOs have been conducted until 2008. The first BPO was conducted in August 2000, and the last one was launched in October 2008. Between these dates two BPOs were conducted every year, except 2000. Every BPO draws on a sample of at least 1,000 respondents, it is

representative for the adult population of Moldova, except for Transnistria, and has a maximum error margin of 3 percent.

BPOs contain two basic questions which allow assessing the evolution of the “European option” in Moldova in 2000-2008. They are: “What do you think is the path our country should follow?” asked by BPOs conducted from August 2000 to May 2004; and “Should there be a referendum next Sunday on Moldova’s accession to EU, how would you vote?” asked by BPOs conducted from May 2003 to October 2008. Diagram 1 below was created on the basis of answers to the first question.

Diagram 1 indicates the distribution of answers for three options from the BPOs conducted from August 2000 to May 2004: (1) “Integration within the EU”; (2) “Integration/ Stay within the CIS”; and (3) “Don’t know”. If the August 2000 BPO is taken as a reference point, the number of respondents who opted for Moldova’s integration within the EU grew by 8.9 percentage points (from 38 to 46.9) until May 2004. At the same time, it is worth to note that the “Integration within the CIS and within the EU” was a compromise option in the August 2000 BPO, and 32 percent of respondents chose it. If this option were missing as in the other subsequent BPOs, then the separate numbers of those favouring the “Integration within the EU” or the “Integration/ Stay within the CIS” option would be probably higher. Starting with the January 2001, BPOs do not provide the compromise option (“Integration within the CIS and within the EU”), as the August 2000 BPO does. Therefore, the January 2001

Diagram 1



- Notes:
- EU – European Union; CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States; DK – Don't know.
 - Data corresponding to DK answers for the August 2000, January 2001, April 2002, and May 2003 BPOs are estimates.
 - A multiple answer was available for the question from the May 2003 BPO.

BPO is a more appropriate starting reference point for measuring the dynamics of the “European option”, than the August 2000 BPO, given the fact that the same questionnaires were used from January 2001 to May 2004. With this caveat in mind, one could note that the number of persons who opted for the EU in January 2001 declined by 4.1 percent (from 51 to 46.9) until May 2004. For comparison, the number of respondents who opted for the CIS in the same period decreased by 12.6 percent (from 43 to 30.4), while that of respondents who did not know to answer increased by 16.5 percent (from 2 to 18.5).

Table 1 below is complementary to Diagram 1 and features the correlation between the configuration of power

structure in Moldova and foreign policy options included in BPOs from August 2000 to May 2004. What the table is revealing, is that, starting with February 2001 – when PCRM came in power – until May 2004, the number of respondents who opted for “Integration within the EU” decreased, that of persons who opted for the “Integration/ Stay within the CIS” option also diminished, while that of respondents who did not know to answer, increased. This dynamics was only partially expectable and further research needs to explain why the number of respondents who opted for CIS diminished in a period when the pro-CIS foreign policy agenda of the PCRM was dominant.

Table 1 – What do you think is the path our country should follow?

Power Structure/ Options	Aug. 2000	Jan. 2001	Nov. 2001	Apr. 2002	Nov. 2002	May 2003	Nov. 2003	May 2004
Government	Braghiș		Tarlev					
Parliament	ADR		PCRM					
President	Lucinschi		Voronin					
EU	38	51	47	40	38	42	51.3	46.9
CIS	20	43	35	41	38	29	26.6	30.4
DK	8	2	17	13	17	14	16.3	18.5

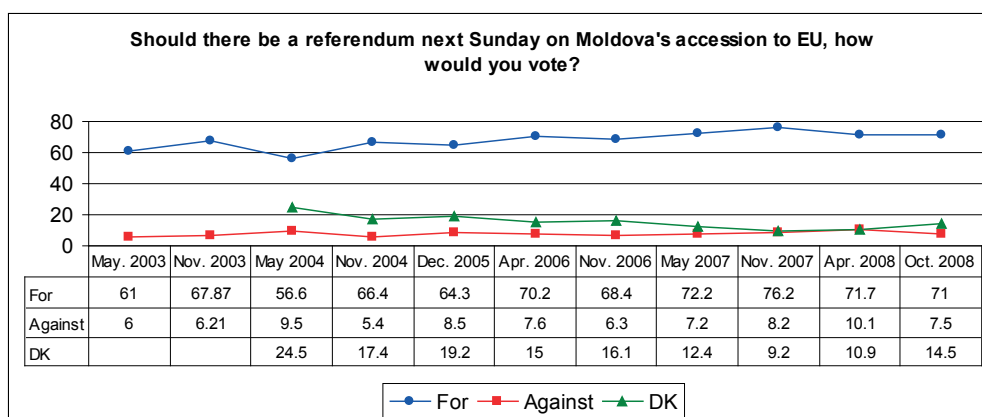
Note: ADR – Alliance for Democracy and Reforms;
PCRM – Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova.

Although the May 2004 BPO was the last one to include the question from Diagram 1, the adherence to the “European idea” may also be observed on the basis of the question whether respondents would vote “For” or “Against” at an eventual referendum on Moldova’s accession to the EU. This question is included for the first time in the May 2003 BPO and it is

part of BPOs conducted till October 2008, except for the January-February 2005 barometer. Diagram 2 below was built on the basis of answers to this question.

Diagram 2 indicates the distribution of answers for three options included in the barometer surveys conducted from May 2003 to October 2008: (1) “For”; (2) “Against”; and (3) “Don’t

Diagram 2



¹ As ADR was left by People’s Christian Democratic Party (PCDP), there was no stable legislative majority. ADR remained *de jure* as the ruling coalition, while *de facto* it was not, Braghiș Cabinet being appointed by PCRM and PCDP.

know". The diagram shows that the number of people who would vote "For" at an eventual referendum on Moldova's accession to the EU grew by 10.0 percentage points (from 61 to 71) until October 2008, while the number of people who would vote "Against" grew by 1.5 percentage points (from 6 to 7.5). At the same time, the percentage of those respondents who did not know to answer decreased by 10.0 (from 24.5 to 14.5) from May 2004 to October 2008. Considering the period when the EU-Moldova Action Plan (EUMAP) was being implemented one could note that from December 2005 to October 2008 the number of those who would vote "For" grew by 6.7 percent, that of respondents who would vote "Against" dropped by 1.0 percent, whereas the percentage of those who did not know to answer decreased by 4.7 in the same period².

The 71.0 percent of respondents who would vote "For" at a referendum on Moldova's accession to the EU, according to the October 2008 BPO, reveals a certain "permissive consensus" in Moldovan society regarding the European integration³. This figure of 71.0 percent is somehow comparable with the average percentage (77.5) of those who voted "For" at the EU

accession referenda held in 2003 in nine European countries⁴. A question to be asked here is to what extent the high proportion of Moldovan citizens supporting European integration is grounded on knowledge about the EU? According to another survey (EFM *et al.*, 2008), 93.6% of people in Moldova have heard of the EU, 77.7% know what the EU is about, but only 46.2% are familiar with the European Neighbourhood Policy, and 36.6% have heard about the EUMAP.

Though this survey does not account for the quality of knowledge about the EU, it suggests that many respondents who pretend to be informed have superficial knowledge about the EU and about the substance of EU-Moldova relations. For example, it shows that a significant share of those respondents who claimed that have heard about the EUMAP consider it wrongly a pre-accession instrument. The same survey reveals that most Moldovan citizens get information about the EU mostly from TV (29.5%) and radio (18.7%), media institutions, Russian TV stations being surprisingly very influential in this regard. What is also strange about Moldovan public opinion is that the dominant perception is that TV stations contribute the most

² The EUMAP was signed on 22 February 2005 and started to be implemented since March-April 2005. The December 2005 BPO was the first survey conducted after the EUMAP was put into practice. As the EUMAP was not fully implemented during the three year period set initially, its fulfilment was rolled-over for an additional year. Though the December 2005-October 2008 period captured by BPOs is not precisely the same as when the EUMAP was being implemented, the former is however quite close to the latter.

³ The concept was borrowed from Lindberg and Scheingold – cited in Hix (2005) – who introduced it in the realm of European Integration Studies to explain public support enjoyed by European integration process in its early years of construction.

⁴ At the EU accession referenda held in 2003 the following percentages of people voted "For": 53.65 in Malta, 89.19 in Slovenia, 83.76 in Hungary, 89.95 in Lithuania, 92.46 in Slovakia, 77.45 in Poland, 77.33 in Czech Republic, 66.92 in Estonia, and 67.00 in Latvia (FCO, 2007). Cyprus and later Bulgaria and Romania have ratified accession treaties by parliamentary vote.

to the European integration of Moldova (17.5%), which are then followed by the Government (14.1%), Parliament (12.1%), Presidency (10.8%), written media (8.9%), radio stations (8.0%), political parties (7.1%), NGOs (5.5%), etc. According to the survey of EFM *et al.* (2008), the public trust in European institutions is relatively high in Moldova, being only exceeded by the trust in Moldovan Church, and the Russian TV stations, but outruns public's confidence in Moldovan governmental institutions. Survey reveals also that the EU is primarily associated with economic prosperity (16.4%), peace (15.3%), freedom of movement (14.3%), and with more jobs (11.6%). In addition, it is believed that European integration will contribute to economic development (82.4%), to the movement of persons (81.4%), to inflows of capital and new technologies (80.3%), to the increase of job opportunities and revenues (79.9%), etc. Given the high influence of Russian TV stations on the Moldovan public opinion, which explains why 49.6% of respondents, according to the October 2008 BPO, consider that the main strategic partner of Moldova should be Russia, compared with only 19.6% opting for the EU, and 19.1% for Romania, one could suppose that if this influence were lower, the number of persons ready to vote "For" at an EU accession referendum, would be greater⁵.

Respondents' answers included in BPOs conducted from August 2000

to October 2008 are stratified on six demographic parameters: (a) sex; (b) residential area; (c) age; (d) education; (e) socioeconomic condition; and (f) nationality. In addition, all six parameters are further disaggregated into sub-parameters (e.g. Male/Female for (a) sex; Urban/ Rural for (b) residential area; etc). Cumulative aggregation of data on each available sub-parameter – except those corresponding to nationality, which is addressed in the next section –, and in relation with each answer option presented in diagrams above allows articulating the following important findings⁶:

(a) Although the majority of women are "Eurooptimistic", their share is smaller than of men. At the same time, more men than women have opted for "Integration/ Stay within the CIS" in the August 2000 - May 2004 BPOs and chose "Against" in the surveys conducted from May 2003 to October 2008 regarding an eventual referendum on Moldova's accession to the EU. On the other hand, more women than men answered "Don't know" to both questions from the above diagrams.

(b) The majority of respondents from urban areas are "Eurooptimistic", but their share is surprisingly lower than in rural areas. More respondents in urban areas opted for "Integration/ Stay within the CIS" than rural respondents in BPOs conducted from August 2000

⁵ The main Russian TV stations broadcast their programs in Moldova. Among them, "OPT" public TV station, being the most influential one, and seen as backing the official course promoted by Kremlin, broadcasts its programmes on the entire territory of the Republic of Moldova.

⁶ For detailed data on all demographic parameters and sub-parameters see IPP (2000-2008).

to May 2004, and “Against” in surveys conducted from May 2003 to October 2008. The number of respondents from rural areas who did not know to answer is slightly higher than that of respondents from towns.

(c) Considering answers corresponding to the following age sub-parameters: 18-29, 30-44, 45-59, and 60 years and over, one could note that generally the degree of “Eurooptimism” or “Euroskepticism” of respondents is directly proportional with their age. The younger the respondents are, the more “Eurooptimistic” they are and *vice versa*. However, an exception should be noted. Respondents aged between 45-59 years would tend more than the persons aged between 30-44 years to vote “For” and less “Against” in the case of an EU accession referendum. Here it was also found out that the older the persons are, the more increases the number of respondents who choose the “Don’t know” answer option.

Drawing on the above age patterns, it would seem at a first glance that public support for the European integration would grow concomitantly with the change of generations. Data from Diagram 2 confirm the growth of this support for the time being. However, this assumption could turn false in the long run, because, as the experience of other European countries shows, the more people get elder, the less

ready they become to support the European building process. Then, European experience also reveals that “permissive consensus” is gradually eroding in time.

(d) The degree of adherence to the “European idea” is directly proportional with the educational level of respondents. The more educated they are, the more they back the European integration of Moldova and *vice versa*.

(e) There is the same kind of direct proportionality for the socioeconomic condition of respondents. The better the lives of the interviewed persons are, the more “Eurooptimistic” they are and the number of those who do not know to answer declines.

3. Attitudes of Ethnic Groups on European Integration

This section explores the relationship between ethnic groups and the “European option” in Moldova. I use here the more recent data from the May 2003 - October 2008 BPOs that show the options of respondents from different ethnic backgrounds to the question which asks how would they vote at a referendum on Moldova’s accession to the EU. This exercise is facilitated by the fact that BPOs give disaggregate data on the options of the most important ethnic groups from Moldova. The hypothesis here is that Moldovans/Romanians⁷ (78.0% out of total population) and Ukrainians (8.4%) have to choose

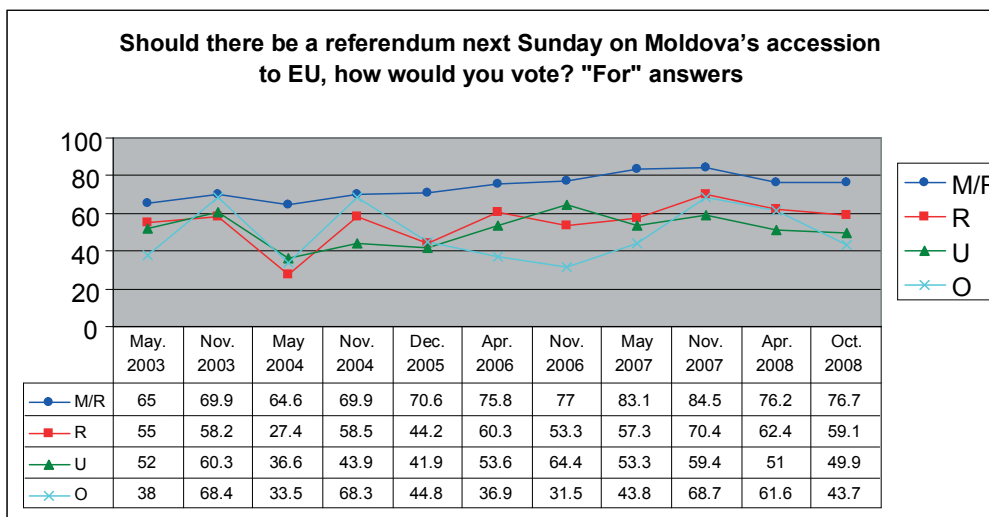
⁷ This category represents in fact the same ethnic, linguistic and cultural group. The difference consists only of their different self-identification, which is a legacy of change in statute through the history of the present territory of the Republic of Moldova.

more often than Russians (5.9%) the “For” option and, respectively, less often than the latter “Against” answer. This hypothesis is grounded on the European vocation and pro-EU course assumed by Moldovan governments in late 1990s and with a renewed stance from 2003 onward, and by Yushchenko administration since the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. I suppose that the Russian minority has to be less supportive of the pro-EU course of Moldova, modelling thus the official policy promoted by Kremlin towards the EU in the Putin and Medvedev era. Hypothesising the preferences of Găgăuz (4.4% out of total population)

and Bulgarians (1.9%), presented by BPOs with the rest of minority groups (1.0%)⁸ under a common heading – “Others”, one could expect them to be more “Eurooptimist” than Russians, given their multidimensional ties with Turkey (an EU candidate country) and, respectively, with Bulgaria (an EU member state). For the sake of simplicity, it is largely possible to equate the “Others” category used by BPOs with Găgăuz and Bulgarians, as these minority groups represent 86.3% of it.

Diagram 3 illustrates the dynamics of “For” answers given by different ethnic group representatives in the

Diagram 3



Note: M/R – Moldovans/ Romanians; R – Russians; U – Ukrainians; and O – Others.

⁸ Percentages in brackets represent the shares of ethnic groups in the total population of Moldova according to the data of the 2004 census (NBSRM, 2004). 0.4 out of the total counted population did not declare its ethnic affiliation. These data exclude population of the break-away Transnistrian region. Though the 2004 census indicates two distinct figures for Moldovans (75.8%) and Romanians (2.2%), this essay cumulates these figures into a single one (78.0%), as they refer to the same ethnic, linguistic and cultural group. It is assumed that they were counted and presented as distinctive ethnic groups by the 2004 census on political grounds.

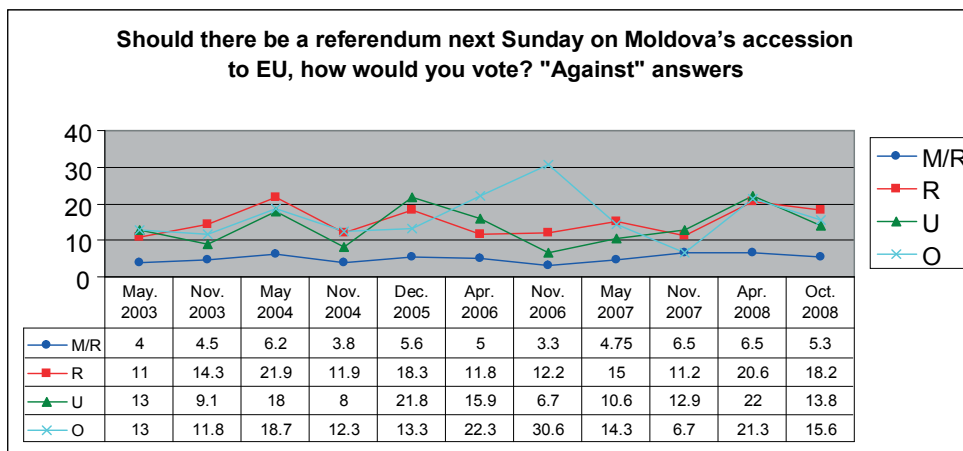
May 2003 - October 2008 period. It reveals that the majority of representatives of ethnic groups in Moldova are in favour of European integration⁹. However, aggregated data for this demographic parameter in relation with the “For” option, show that the proportion of the “Eurooptimists” from the dominant ethnic group outnumbers significantly that of the “Eurooptimists” representing ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, the number of representatives of national minorities who would vote “For” is about 3.4-fold higher than that of those who would vote “Against”.

The number of Moldovans/Romanians who would vote “For” at a referendum on EU accession increased with 11.7 percent (from 65 to 76.7 percent), that representing Russian minority increased with 4.1 percent (from 55

to 59.1 percent), that of Ukrainians dropped by 2.1 (from 52 to 49.9 percent), while that of persons with other ethnic origin increased with 5.7 (from 38 to 43.7 percent) during the May 2003 - October 2008 period. Data for the above mentioned period reveal also that representatives of other ethnic backgrounds (labelled by BPOs as “Others”) would vote the least “For” at an eventual referendum on Moldova’s accession to the EU. The same data casts surprisingly out the tendency of the Russian minority’s representatives to choose the “For” option more often than respondents of Ukrainian origin. These findings contradict the hypothesis formulated at the beginning of this section.

However, Diagram 4 below shows that in the case of Russians the hypothesis is partially true because, they, in comparison with the

Diagram 4



⁹ As regards the question about Moldova’s foreign orientation included in BPOs conducted from August 2000 to May 2004, most Moldovans/ Romanians chose the “Integration within the EU”, while most representatives of Russian, Ukrainian minorities, and with other ethnic origin chose the “Integration/ Stay within the CIS”. The *Etnobarometru – Republica Moldova* (eng. *Ethno-barometer – Republic of Moldova*) results, a survey conducted in 2005, revealed the same pattern of public preferences (IPP et al., 2005).

Ukrainians, also tend at the same time to opt more often for the “Against” answer option, should there be a referendum on EU accession.

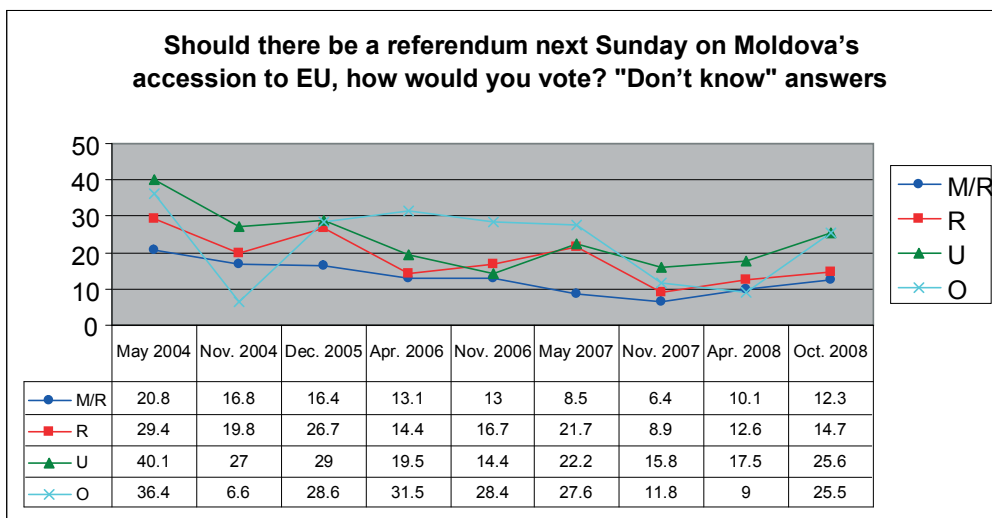
The data for the May 2003 - October 2008 period referred to in Diagram 4 are also revealing that Moldovans/Romanians are the least inclined to vote “Against”, while representatives of those ethnic groups labelled by BPOs as “Others” are the most ready to do so. This, in contrast with the above working hypothesis, stresses again that the latter are the least supportive of the European course of Moldova¹⁰. Though with some differences, by at large, the number of “Eurooptimist” or “Europesimist” representatives

of Russian, Ukrainian, and of other minorities are largely comparable. However, it remains unknown why the Russian minority representatives tend to choose more often the “For” option than Ukrainian or other minority groups, and less often the “Against” option in the case of an EU accession referendum, than respondents from those ethnic backgrounds labelled as “Others”. Further research is needed to address this black box.

Finally, Diagram 5 below illustrates the distribution of “Don’t know” answers for each ethnic group.

The data for the entire period referred to in this diagram reveal a somehow already familiar pattern.

Diagram 5



¹⁰ According to the EFM *et al.* (2008) survey, apart from Moldovans/Romanians, Bulgarians are also strong supporters of European integration of Moldova. I cannot confirm or disprove this finding because BPOs do not provide disaggregate data with regard to Bulgarians. Their answers are counted in BPOs together with those of Găgăuz and of representatives of the smallest minority groups from Moldova under the common heading – “Others”. However, if the EFM *et al.* (2008) finding is correct then it could be asserted that Găgăuz, among the main ethnic groups from Moldova, are the least supporters of its European integration course.

Moldovans/ Romanians are less inclined to choose “Don’t know” answer option, while representatives of other ethnic groups (other than Russians and Ukrainians) are the most ready to do so. In between there are again representatives of Russian and Ukrainian minorities, the former ones tending to choose this answer option less than the latter.

4. “Eurooptimists” and the Hierarchy of Demographic Parameters Dividing Public Attitudes on European Integration

Findings from the above sections allow identifying the sociological profile of the “Eurooptimistic” category of people from Moldova. Summing them up, one could state that *men, persons from rural areas, the younger, Moldovans/Romanians, the more educated people and with better life standards* are more fervent supporters of European integration of Moldova. The profile of “Eurooptimists” from Moldova is largely consistent with that of “Eurooptimists” at the EU level (cf. Hix, 2005). The only exception is that at the EU level persons from urban areas are supporting more the EU building process. This digression from European public opinion trends might be explained by the fact that the more significant ethnic minorities in Moldova, being less “Eurooptimistic” than the dominant ethnic group, are

largely concentrated in towns, and by the dominance of rural population in Moldova.

Cumulative aggregation of data on available demographic sub-parameters (e.g. Male/Female; Urban/ Rural; etc.) in relation with the “Integration within the EU” and “For” answer options from Diagrams 1 and 2 above allows in addition establishing a hierarchy of all parameters based on the extent to which they divide Moldovan public opinion on European integration. This hierarchy for the August 2000 - October 2008 period was found as follows: (1) Education; (2) Age; (3) Nationality; (4) Socioeconomic condition; (5) Residential area; and (6) Sex¹¹. In other words, differences in education of respondents divide in the most abrupt way the public opinion on European integration opportunity of Moldova, while the different genders induce the smallest difference between options of respondents for the “European idea”. A worthwhile observation here is that age differences and those in terms of ethnic affiliation are only slightly less dividing the public opinion than discrepancies in education, what makes these types of demographic differences comparable according to their significance for public preferences. On the other side, gender differences and those with regard to area of residence are also comparable, but they are the least significant and do not account for adversative attitudes towards European integration.

¹¹ “Data from BPOs that ask how would respondents vote should there be a referendum on Moldova’s accession to EU, from May 2003 to October 2008, reveal a similar hierarchy: (1) Nationality; (2) Age; (3) Education; (4) Socioeconomic condition; (5) Sex; and (6) Residential area. This might suggest that ethnic differences started to become more salient in determining respondents’ options on European integration of Moldova. In any case, it is again confirmed that age, education and nationality (in alphabetical order) are the most important demographic parameters dividing public opinion on European integration, while residential area and sex are the least important ones.

5. Conclusions: Need for a Well-Defined Targeted Communication

This essay explores the dynamics of Moldovan public opinion on European integration for the 2000-2008 period. For this purpose, the paper has used data provided by sixteen BPOs commissioned by the Institute of Public Policy. The most general conclusion is that the majority of Moldovan citizens, including the majority of representatives of different ethnic groups, support the European integration of Moldova. However, for the sake of more precision after aggregating data on six demographic parameters this paper found out that men, persons from rural areas, the younger, Moldovans/ Romanians, the more educated people and with better life standards are more fervent supporters of European integration of Moldova. The sociological profile of this more "Eurooptimistic" category of people from Moldova is largely consistent with that of "Eurooptimists" at the EU level.

This paper has surprisingly found out that the hypothesis according to which representatives of Russian minority have to be less in favour of a pro-EU course of Moldova than those

of Ukrainian, and of other minorities could not be proved by the available data. The proportions of "Eurooptimists" or "Europesimists" from Russian, Ukrainian or other ethnic backgrounds are largely comparable.

The present essay finally concludes that the differences in education of the respondents divide in the most abrupt way the public opinion on European integration opportunity of Moldova, while the different genders induce the smallest difference between options of respondents for the "European idea". In practical terms, the identified hierarchy of demographic parameters based on the extent to which they divide Moldovan public opinion concerning European integration might be of help to relevant governmental bodies that should consider specific outreach campaigns while promoting the "European idea" in Moldova. To this effect the paper suggests implicitly that persons with secondary or professional education, the elderly, and representatives of national minorities have to be primary targets within such information campaigns. In general, more communication across education, age, and ethnic cleavages would also serve this purpose.

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