

GLOBAL EUROPE CENTRE **FOCUS** **GROUPS BRIEF**

*Moldova's Focus Groups
'Widening a European Dialogue in Moldova'*

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MOLDOVA'S FOCUS GROUPS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Focus Groups (FGs), conducted in Moldova between 28 March and 11 April 2014, represent the second stage in the assessment of public attitudes towards the European Union (EU), the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP), Russia and the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU). They followed a nationwide representative survey undertaken in October-November 2013¹, to enable an individual-level response and more in-depth investigation of some of the key issues raised by the survey.

The outcomes of focus groups reveal the following trends in the attitudes of the respondents:

- Despite a slight decline in public interest and support for the EU, registered by the survey, the individual-level responses of focus groups display signs of the ongoing internalisation of the EU narratives into public behaviour and attitudes
- Through their comments, FG respondents also exhibit an increasing urge and urgency to focus on rebuilding Moldova's state capacity to make it a strong, independent, stable, functional and self-respected nation, and a 'home' for its citizens to harness emigration
- In congruence with the survey's findings, Moldovan respondents experience an actualising sense of rivalry between the two regional projects – the EaP and the ECU – and express a growing concern about the prospect for constructive dialogue between the EU and Russia and its implications for the eastern neighbourhood



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Thematic Block I: Moldova and the World

- The European direction is now decisively regarded as part of Moldova's national interest and strongly associated with 'living better and facing the future with more confidence'
- There is also a growing demand for more domestic stability, more effective government and more balanced neighbourly relations with all interested parties
- Transdnistria is no longer seen as an obstacle to Moldova's European integration

Thematic Block II: Moldova-EU relations under the EaP

- Respondents believe that they are perceived in Europe as 'second-rated', poor and underdeveloped. At the same time, they feel they are important for the EU, being almost 'the only state in the region favourable to the EU'
- Respondents feel they can trust the EU, and that the EU in return, has trust in Moldova
- There is an increasing congruence in public perceptions of what the EU does for Moldova and what people really need, neatly expressed in the phrase 'I really feel change, in education, in justice and in our lives'

Thematic Block III: Moldova-Russia relations, including perceptions of/attitudes to the ECU

- Respondents feel they are often treated in a derogatory and abrasive manner in Russia, often being referred to as 'dirty people'
- Many indicated no sense of trust in Russia-Moldovan relations, with the latter being viewed as relations of subordination and compliance
- The ECU and Russia are regarded as important and accessible suppliers of energy and goods, but also as a source of political pressure, poverty and instability
- Respondents felt split between the two regional alternatives – the EaP and the ECU – and strongly preferred, at least in the short term, more balanced relations with neighbours, including Russia
- Most important lessons learned from the Crimea and Ukraine include the need for better communication, more information and effective government, to assure stability



MOLDOVA'S FOCUS GROUPS: MAIN FINDINGS

Thematic Block I: Moldova and the World

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

In particular, when discussing their country's foreign policy priorities as well as most pressing needs and public interests, the respondents seem to have fallen into two major categories:

- 1 those feeling fully committed to the European course: 'I personally see the light at the end of the tunnel, and that light is the EU. I see achievements, decent living, prosperity for our youth

- 2 those feeling European, but prioritising Moldova's independence and interests, which they see in rebuilding its state capacity for a strong and self-respected nation, and which would have peaceful and stable relations with all the neighbours, including Russia, for the benefit of all.

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

All respondents indicated that they wanted to see healthy and balanced relations with all their neighbours, and especially with Russia and

Ukraine, while anticipating the development of closer ties with Europe. Many also expressed a growing sense of affinity with the European nations, especially with Romania and Germany. No respondent referred to the ECU as a foreign policy priority. At the same time, a sense of acute ambivalence prevailed when juxtaposing the EU and Russia. Respondents felt they had limited information to fully commit to their European future and feared it would come at a great personal cost and insecurity. They also insisted on the need to have a good working relationship with both power centres, and loathed having to choose between them: 'we need stability, safety and welfare, with all our neighbours'; 'being one-sided would be detrimental for Moldova'. They valued Russia as a jobs, goods and trade market, while the EU – as an attractive but still a distant future. When pressed further, however, in the majority, they felt they would prioritise the EU, because of its higher living standards, advancement, work opportunities, different (more positive) attitude, transparency, continuing support, and also because the EU had become the choice of the younger generation.



CONTINUED OVERLEAF

MOLDOVA'S FOCUS GROUPS: MAIN FINDINGS (CONT)

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

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

Finally, Transnistria (TMR) was no longer seen as an obstacle to further European integration. Respondents felt that TMR became too different to them. They also felt it proved it could survive independently from Moldova, and many believed the government should 'let it go'.

In summary, although increasingly pro-European in their behaviour and attitudes, Moldovans felt that prioritising good neighbourly relations, with Russia inclusive, and building a strong nation, to become a home for its citizens once more, are imperative and urgent tasks to achieve for their government.

Thematic Block II: EU-Moldova relations under the EaP

A trend for critical self-assessment detected in public attitudes by the 2013 survey, seems to continue at the individual level of focus groups. In particular, respondents felt that 'the EU does not yet see us as a nation': 'we are still perceived as part of the FSU or Russia'; as a 'second-rated, poor and inferior nation', 'they see us as retarded, we've got low economic and cultural levels of development', and 'the truth is they don't know Moldova, and our location'. Respondents also commented that often 'living beyond our means and having all these luxurious cars and mansions in the disposal of our politicians' may send the wrong signal to Europe. Only a handful of respondents mentioned corruption as an endemic problem of the state.





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

There is an increasing congruence in public perceptions of what the EU does for Moldova, and what people really need. The respondents believe the EU could help to improve governance especially when implementing reforms, infrastructure, legal system, quality of life, human rights protection, and more generally, to help with strategic development and instil a new way of thinking, while 'we could do all the rest ourselves'. These fully corresponded to interviewees' call for better education, more stability, more effective governance, and rebuilding infrastructure at home, to offer permanent jobs and wages. Education, water projects, agriculture, business, technologies were identified as success stories of the EU-Moldova cooperation.

As one respondent commented: 'I really could feel changes: reforms are slow, fighting with corruption and for quality. But you could now see villages with schools, and nurseries; improving justice and health systems; proper water supplies for rural communities, and much more!'

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

MOLDOVA'S FOCUS GROUPS: MAIN FINDINGS (CONT)

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

In summary, FG results conveyed a positive sense of commitment to Europe as a project. Although displaying a fair share of self-criticism, respondents nevertheless remained positive about their future, and how they are now being represented/ perceived in Europe – as a hard-working nation, which could be trusted – which together with the emphasis on rebuilding the state, as their home, thrust a reassuring outlook onto the future. Furthermore, although cultural differences were explicitly noted, many believed there was room for shared learning as well as cohabitation in diversity.

Thematic Block III: Moldova-Russia Relations, including perceptions of/attitudes to the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU)

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

Many respondents observe strong historical connections and collective memories with Russia, premised on the language, cultural traditions and its accessibility. At the same time, many also note differences in attitudes when compared to the EU: 'Russia still sees us as part of the

FSU, and by default, part of Russia'; 'Moldovans for them are associated with "dirty people", "beggars"'; 'they treat us as migrant workers, with no rights or equality'; 'they look down on us, and treat us as second-class citizens'; 'they see us as parasites which cause problems'; 'we are not treated as an independent nation, we are Russia's extension, we are dependants'. Only very occasionally, a positive comment emerged suggesting that 'Russia knows us well, we shared history with them, they know we are just the 'Gastarbeiters' for them'. The differentiating factor between the EU and Russia, in the perceptions of respondents, seems to be a degree of 'familiarity': while the EU may not know Moldovans well enough and hence treat them cautiously; Russia knows Moldovans too well, and treats them derogatively.





All respondents commented on low levels of trust between the two countries: 'There is no, and never has been. There is only subordination and compliance'.

Nevertheless, respondents view Russia as an important source for their economic stability, in terms of providing gas and oil supplies, and also serving as a market to sell their goods, and agricultural proceeds. That said, Russia is also seen as a source of anxiety, insecurity and poverty: 'Poverty in Russia is greater than ours, and they only pretend they help to reform...'; 'Russia will never help Moldova'; 'They might help with Transnistria, because Putin is clever, but only if they wanted to'. More often respondents note their sense of remorse, and dependency on Russia, and look forward to rebuilding themselves as a nation to withstand the pressure:

'Why can't they leave us for ever in peace??', especially that 'our economic relations are not functioning at all, mainly because of Russia's unfair treatment and regular embargoes'.

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

although many common cultural features were identified between Moldovans and Russians, including Orthodox faith, language, traditions and even a set of mind; a stronger cultural affinity has now been displayed with Europe, even if in rhetoric only.

Most important lessons learned from the Crimea and Ukraine included the need for better communication, more information and effective government, to assure stability.

In conclusion, although the 2013 survey registered some erosion of national identity amongst the Moldovans, and also their dwindling interest in the EU, the FG results seem to challenge the picture. At an individual level, the FG respondents displayed a firm sense of commitment to the European future, and gradual internalisation of EU narratives, expressed through positive associations, attitudes, critical self-awareness, and juxtaposition with Russia. Furthermore, although public opinion may be divided with regards to immediate economic benefits, preferences and market accessibility of both regional projects – the EaP and the ECU – there was no doubt amongst the FG participants, that cooperation with the EU offered a more stable outlook into the future. More communication from the government, more information about the EU, and more tangible reforms are needed, to forge preferences into commitments, and promises into real incentives.

INFORMATION

Professor Elena A Korosteleva (Principal Investigator) is Director of the Global Europe Centre (Professional Studies), Jean Monnet Chair in European Studies at the University of Kent, and a Visiting Professorial Fellow at the Belarusian State University. Elena's main research interests include EU foreign policies, European External Action Service, European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership, EU governance, democracy promotion and the concepts of democracy.

Slovak Atlantic Commission (SAC):

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

'Widening the European Dialogue in Moldova' project (SAMRS 2013/VP/01/19), implemented by the SAC with the assistance of its think-tank, the Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), has the ambition to contribute to the efforts aimed at increasing public support for EU integration in Moldova, particularly utilizing Central Europe's recent

experience with the EU integration process. The project was financially supported by SlovakAid.

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Global Europe Centre (GEC)

The Global Europe Centre (GEC) is a new research centre at the University of Kent focusing on Europe, its member states, and its place in a changing world. The Centre brings together leading international academics from politics and international relations, economics, law, business, and European culture in order to explore the contemporary policy challenges to Europe and its nation states.

The GEC is based within the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR) and at the Brussels School of International Studies (BSIS), University of Kent.

'OPINIA', Independent Sociological Service, Moldova

The Independent Sociology and Information Service (ISIS) 'OPINIA', founded in 1992 as a branch of the All-Union Public Opinion Research Centre (WCIOM), is the 1st sociological service in the Republic of Moldova, specialising in public opinion, political, social and marketing research. It is a member of the 'Scientific Cooperation of Research Institutions in the CIS region' consortium since 2000; and member of the European Centre for Social Studies since 2005. Over the years it conducted numerous international projects, including 'EU partnership-building approach with Eastern Europe' (Aberystwyth University, UK); 'Social Capital and Democracy' (Aberdeen University, UK); 'Youth Transition Studies' (INTAS), 'Patterns of migration' (INTAS), etc.

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MOLDOVA'S VALUES SURVEY: A TECHNICAL REPORT²

Six focus group discussions were carried out by Independent Sociological and Information Service 'OPINIA', between 28 March and 11 April 2014, as part of the wider research project titled 'Widening the European Dialogue in Moldova', under the research leadership of Professor E Korosteleva (GEC) and administrative and financial management of M Skala (SAC).

Focus groups on average lasted up to 2 hours and were video- and audio-recorded, using local languages for interlocution. They comprised of 8-9 participants each of whom were sampled using a snowballing method and a screening questionnaire. Individual groups were of mixed origin, broken down by gender, age and education.

Geographically, focus groups were conducted in the Central Region (2 FGs) – municipality Chisinau and village Balabanesti (county Criuleni),

in the Northern Region (2 FGs) – municipality Balti and village Corlateni (county Rascani) and in the Southern Region (2 FGs) – city Causeni and village Chirsova (ATU Gagauzia).

The questionnaire included three thematic blocks addressing public perceptions, behavioural patterns and levels of awareness about

- i Moldova in the World
- ii Moldova-EU relations under the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP)

- iii Moldova-Russia relations including public perceptions of the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU)

The findings are cross-compared with the surveys undertaken by the Principal Investigator in 2013, and 2009³, as well as other available data, including the EU Neighbourhood Barometer East (Autumn 2012).

Documents available on request for further inspection:

- Analytical report of the FGs
- Instructions for moderators; screening questionnaire
- Questionnaire in English, Russian and Romanian languages
- Technical report of the FGs
- Transcripts of individual FGs



² This survey is commissioned by the Slovak Atlantic Commission, under the leadership of Michal Skala, MA, for the project 'Widening the European Dialogue in Moldova' (SAMRS 2013/NP/01/19) financially supported by SlovakAid. The findings are the copyright of the University of Kent. Please cite accordingly.

³ A synopsis of the 2009 findings is available from www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/europeanising-securitising-outsiders/researchfindings/

FURTHER INFORMATION

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