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# **WHAT DO MOLDOVANS THINK ABOUT NATO? PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE ALLIANCE AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

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The current perception of citizens regarding NATO and the relationship that the Republic of Moldova has with the North Atlantic Alliance remains a legacy from the past, dominated by prejudices, stereotypes, and clichés, an attitude that changes extremely slowly in the absence of any comprehensive public information campaign.

The East-West geopolitical paradigm, which is predominant in the political, social, and economic life of the Republic of Moldova, remains a determining factor in the public's assimilation of the country's partnership with NATO. A possible NATO membership is perceived as a potential risk for regional destabilization, drawing parallels with the situation in Ukraine. The potential NATO accession is presented through a situational narrative as a serious danger, further reinforced by the strategic narrative inherited from the Cold War era, namely the expansion of the NATO military bloc. Through well-directed messages, it is portrayed, on the one hand, as a threat to the neutrality of the Republic of Moldova, and on the other hand, as a step that could trigger direct confrontation with Russia, thereby jeopardizing security in the Eastern European region.

Taking into consideration the regional and national security challenges, cooperation with NATO is essential for security sector reform. The Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) between the Republic of Moldova and NATO states that the implementation of IPAP is not aimed at NATO membership but should encourage and support the reform in the security and national defense sectors. The partnership with NATO is also seen as a mechanism to advance Moldova's European path (Moldova has become a candidate). According to the Moldova-NATO IPAP, the main strategic objectives of the Republic of Moldova are European integration, improving dialogue, and deepening relations with Euro-Atlantic structures.

Moreover, the defense and security domain is one of the key elements of the partnership between the Republic of Moldova and NATO, but there are also other priority dimensions in its promotion. Efforts to enhance resilience are also essential as they can be combined with the development of Moldova's defense capabilities. It is natural to have a mutual interest in such communication between Moldova and NATO. The North Atlantic Alliance is seen as the most cohesive political and military alliance based on collective defense, but there are challenges:

- The low level of security culture within society and the political class, along with inadequate public communication in the field of security and defense, diminishes public and political support for more decisive actions to strengthen security, defense, and cooperation with NATO and the EU. Furthermore, investments in strengthening the security and defense sector are unpopular in society and can create image costs (due to misinformation and propaganda) for political actors, thus discouraging more decisive policies and actions. Particularly noteworthy are toxic propaganda campaigns and manipulation aimed at security partnerships, the actions of external allies of the Republic of Moldova, as well as actions, and even intentions, to enhance resilience. Even the subject of constitutional neutrality is exploited in a manipulative manner to discourage public support for strengthening defense capabilities or other actions to fortify Moldova's security.
- The aggressive anti-NATO discourse of the Russian mass media in the Republic of Moldova is intense. As a result, every diplomatic or administrative detail of Chisinau's relationship with international organizations has been turned into a propaganda tool. The dissemination of this constant anti-NATO rhetoric, supported by all possible channels, is particularly reflected in public opinion polls conducted in the Republic of Moldova, which have revealed opposition among the population towards any potential alignment with the North Atlantic Alliance.

One factor that directly influences the level of Moldova-NATO cooperation and deserves special attention is the society of the Republic of Moldova. Here, a phenomenon of mutual influence can be observed. On the one hand, the will of society influences the country's relationship with NATO.

On the other hand, the closer the collaboration, catalyzed by effective strategic communication, the more society seems to accept the new paradigm of relations with NATO. Currently, it is still premature to mention a significant increase in the number of supporters for a closer relationship with NATO. However, surveys show a slight increase in the number of those who consider a closer relationship with NATO to be beneficial for the Republic of Moldova - by approximately 8% in less than six months.

Even though this category of people is not yet in the majority, there is a theoretical internalization of the new reality in the consciousness of society. In the medium and long term, this can create the necessary conditions for even closer ties between Moldova and the alliance, undoubtedly raising the level of security and prosperity in the country.

The sociological survey data reveals contradictory approaches maintained in Moldovan society as a whole regarding NATO. The collected data reflects the ambivalence of public attitudes towards NATO in Moldova. Public opinion is still vulnerable to specific cases, such as NATO's operation in Serbia in 1999 or the ongoing war in Iraq. NATO can be viewed in different ways, but first and foremost, we cannot neglect the fact that the Alliance is the most powerful military-political bloc in the world, forming the core of the European security system, including its eastward expansion. Secondly, Moldova does not have such a high level of beneficial military and political cooperation with any other international organization (country). Lastly, today, there is no reasonable alternative to deepening cooperation, as proven by past experience and exacerbated by the challenging security environment.

In recent surveys [1], the attitude of Moldovan citizens towards NATO shows positive trends: the Alliance is now less frequently seen as a belligerent warrior. At the same time, non-acceptance of NATO's use of force is evident. In the future, the attitude of Moldovan citizens towards the Alliance will likely depend on its development trends and the government's policy, political discourse, and strategic orientation of the country.

For example, public perceptions of NATO in Ukraine are shaped by the government's consistent policy towards NATO, as well as the massive, diverse, and heterogeneous information available. Past stereotypes coexist in public opinion with the optimism of younger generations and educated individuals. Expert assessments also vary greatly from public opinions. There is no common view on NATO in the Republic of Moldova. This issue has not yet been widely discussed in the public space, and there is no well-formulated opinion regarding the future of cooperation with the Alliance.

It is worth mentioning that several respondents, from all focus group discussions, are confused regarding the accession to the EU and NATO. Some talk in parallel about both groups, as if integration into the EU automatically implies NATO membership, and the economic benefits of European integration are mixed up with military aspects following NATO accession.

The major issue with public perception of NATO in Moldova is that regular contacts with NATO are, in fact, a prerogative of the highest echelons of state power - a small circle of military and civilian experts. Agreements with NATO largely develop "behind the scenes" and are not accompanied by an extensive information campaign, which in turn explains the low level of awareness among citizens regarding NATO activities. Only a small number of respondents declared a high level of knowledge about NATO, and every fourth person claimed an intermediate level of knowledge.[2] At the same time, two-thirds of citizens either stated that their level of awareness about NATO is low (49.7%) or had no information about NATO (19.2%). What are the reasons for citizens' limited knowledge about the Alliance?

First, previous surveys conducted by CBS Axis showed that foreign policy issues concern citizens much less than internal social and economic problems.[3] This is natural for any country. It would be rather odd if citizens were more concerned about the progress of the PfP Program implementation than about unemployment rates and timely payment of salaries and pensions.

Second, authorities provide limited information about cooperation with the alliance and joint programs. Regarding the information deficit, a significant part of Moldovan citizens view NATO either under the influence of distorted stereotypes from the past or under the influence of Russian mass media assessments, which have so far not been friendly towards the Alliance.

[1] SONDAJ SOCIO-POLITIC iunie 2023, [https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Sondaj-WD\\_RO\\_versiune-integrala\\_iunie-2023-1.pdf](https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Sondaj-WD_RO_versiune-integrala_iunie-2023-1.pdf)

[2] Percepția populației despre amenințări și instituții de securitate ale Republicii Moldova, <https://infocenter.md/perceptia-populatiei-despre-amenintari-si-institutii-de-securitate-ale-republicii-moldova-2/>

[3] Percepții publice asupra sistemului de securitate și apărare a RM. [https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/5\\_Sondaj-Perceptii-publice-asupra-sistemului-de-securitate-si-aparare-a-Republicii-Moldova.pdf](https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/5_Sondaj-Perceptii-publice-asupra-sistemului-de-securitate-si-aparare-a-Republicii-Moldova.pdf)

A survey commissioned by the Information and Documentation Center on NATO in Moldova showed that only 27% of respondents are aware of the organization.[4] Thus, the lack of information about NATO is as big, if not bigger, of a problem as disinformation on the subject.

Combating unjustified Russian influence and propaganda is important, but without having a serious public discussion about Moldova's commitment to enhancing defense capabilities and addressing the country's neutral status in line with increased cooperation with NATO, the topic will remain more of an electoral bargaining chip than a strategic national choice. The opinions expressed by participants in thematic discussions about NATO are diverse, mixed, and sometimes contradictory, reflecting a wide range of perceptions that encompass the understanding of benefits, the organization's importance in ensuring peace and security, solidarity, and protection.

Both sociological surveys and focus groups have demonstrated low knowledge about NATO and confusion regarding the accession to the EU and NATO. Some respondents talk in parallel about both groups, as if integration into the EU automatically implies NATO membership, and the economic benefits of European integration are confused with military aspects following NATO accession.

On the other hand, surveys show that the majority of respondents believe that the Republic of Moldova should receive assistance in reforming the security sector.

Despite the perpetuation of false narratives that external assistance provided to the Republic of Moldova for security sector reform constitutes interference in internal affairs and contrary to the messages of various governments in Chisinau about the lack of public support for the development of defense partnerships with NATO, the EU, and strategic partners, most respondents (66%) answered "definitely yes" or "probably yes" in favor of foreign assistance in reforming the sector.

At the same time, there is a strong segmentation of the population based on the connection to Russian

media production, which becomes visible through correlations with linguistic groups and geopolitical preferences.

The focus groups [5] repeatedly demonstrated different levels of awareness, with limited knowledge about Moldova's cooperation with NATO, citing insufficient media coverage as the reason and considering it not adequately explained. The results reflect the diversity of views on NATO and the existing discourses and stereotypes in Moldovan society.

Opinions about the Alliance vary depending on the level of knowledge, region, age, language spoken, and education level. Some respondents associate cooperation and potential accession with the loss of independence and involvement in conflicts, citing the case of Ukraine.

The war in the neighborhood has not radically changed opinions about NATO. Only a minority have reinforced their trust in NATO or view the bloc with more respect, favored by the volume of assistance provided to Ukraine. Respondents who position themselves against the Alliance have noted that they have reinforced their belief that NATO is a bloc created for wars and destruction.

Participants identify the advantages of cooperation with NATO, which include strengthening the country's defense capacity, developing the armed forces, increasing security, and economic and infrastructure development.

In parallel, the disadvantages of NATO accession mentioned by respondents include concerns about the risks associated with cooperation with NATO, particularly the extension of the war to the territory of the Republic of Moldova, fueled by a lack of knowledge, propaganda, and security culture. Other concerns include maintaining neutral status and non-involvement in military alliances, as well as cooperation being in line with the values of peace and democracy, without directly implying military cooperation.

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[4] Studiu cu privire la percepția populației cu privire la sistemul de securitate și apărare a RM. <https://infocenter.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Date-Studiu-Strategia-de-Securitate.pdf>

[5] Opinii și percepții privind ordinea publică, securitatea statului și colaborarea Republicii Moldova cu Uniunea Europeană și NATO. <https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Opinii-si-perceptii-privind-ordinea-publica-securitatea-statului-si-colaborarea-cu-Republicii-Moldova-cu-Uniunea-Europeana-si-NATO.pdf>



The recommendations regarding cooperation with NATO can be characterized as constructive, based on a clear understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of our country's collaboration with the North Atlantic Alliance:

- Exchange of information that contributes to strengthening Moldova's defense capacity;
- Development of military cooperation and professionalization, particularly through collaborative projects in logistics and military equipment;
- Involvement of NATO in promoting a solution for the withdrawal of Russian troops and the reunification of the country;
- Among the proposals for developing a security culture and understanding the benefits of cooperation with organizations such as NATO and the EU, there is a need for communication about implemented projects, transparency in presenting project results, and official visits.

- Organization of a national campaign for information and explanation with the involvement of state and non-state stakeholders;
- Establishment of collaboration between government institutions responsible for cooperation with NATO, the NATO Liaison Office, the NATO Contact Point Embassy, the embassies of NATO member and partner countries, experts, civil society, academia, and the media.

## Conclusions and recommendations:

We can observe that over the years, the information space in the Republic of Moldova has been heavily influenced by the Russian Federation, with Russian narratives being widely spread. NATO is still perceived in the Republic of Moldova more as a politico-military bloc with an expansion agenda rather than a partner for development and modernization in the field of defense and security.

The Republic of Moldova fully benefits from cooperation with NATO, with the agenda guided by the national interests of the Republic of Moldova and its explicit requests. Currently, we cannot identify any other partnership that is more viable and constructive, contributing to the development of military capabilities, security, and defense.

In this regard, for the positive and objective promotion of NATO, continuous and objective information is needed through various public engagement tools, such as:

- Identification of a strategic communication plan to promote cooperation with NATO, aiming to identify the overall vision, narratives, key topics, and a set of public engagement tools;